

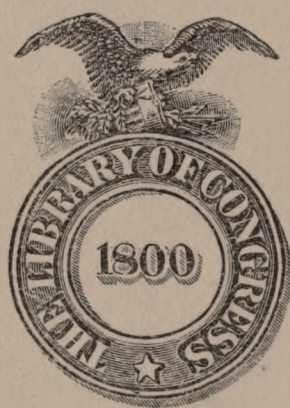
Those Smith Boys

THOSE
SMITH BOYS
SERIES
W. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHERS



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Howard R. Garis



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THOSE SMITH BOYS

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THOSE SMITH BOYS

CHAPTER I

FLYING A KITE

"Say, Cap, how big you going to make it, anyhow?"

"Never you mind, Sawed-off, you just run in and get me that other ball of cord, the ruler and my other knife. I'm making this kite."

"It certainly looks so, Cap," added the other of the three lads who were grouped under the big cherry tree. "Don't you want to give some more orders? Can't I get you the paper, and some sticks and the hammer and nails? Then, maybe, the kite will make itself, and you can sit still and watch it grow."

"Aw, quit fooling, and help a fellow, will you? We want to give it a trial while the wind's good."

"All right, Cap," said Pete Smith, who, because of his short stature was familiarly known as "Sawed-off." He got up from the ground where he had been lying, watching his older brother John Smith, known as "Cap", from the fact that his name was the same as that of the old Indian fighter, Captain John Smith. "All right, Cap," repeated Pete, "I'll get the things, but I should think Bill could help some."

"Didn't I help?" demanded William, who was never

called anything else but Bill. "Didn't I get the sticks? Think I'm going to do it all?"

"Easy now," pleaded Cap. "Go on, Sawed-off, get the things, and I'll have this kite made in a jiffy. It'll be a dandy and I'll bet it will lift twenty pounds."

"How big is it going to be, anyhow?" asked Bill, as he watched his brother fitting the long sticks together and tying them at the place where they joined.

"About seven feet high, and almost as broad. It's the biggest one we've made yet, and I guess this wind is strong enough to take it up."

"It feels so. Got any string strong enough to hold her?"

"Sure. I got some on purpose. Here, hold this stick a minute; will you? I want to put the string around the outer edge."

Bill got up and held the kite frame, while his brother put the string tightly around the ends of the crossed sticks.

When this was done Pete returned with another ball of cord, the ruler and his brother's knife.

"Say that'll be a beaut!" he exclaimed.

"Wait until I get the paper on," advised John.

"It's got to be pretty tough, or the wind will tear it all to pieces," remarked William.

"I know it. I got some at Johnson's store. Look out there Pete, don't step in the paste!"

Pete stepped aside just in time to avoid tramping into a cup of flour and water, which John had mixed to use in putting the paper on the kite frame.

The paper was unfolded, laid out on a smooth place

on the ground, and then John proceeded to cut it the shape of the kite, leaving a margin to fold over and paste down. When the paper was properly on, John, with the aid of his two brothers bent the cross stick of the kite in the shape of a bow, fastening it with what corresponded to the bow string.

"There!" exclaimed John, as he looked with admiration at the big kite. "Now if it goes up we'll have some fun this afternoon."

"And no tail to bother with, and get tangled in the cord," added Pete.

For it was a tailless kite that the lads had made.

"Seems to me the wind's dying out," said William, rather anxiously, peering up into the sky.

"Oh, I guess it'll hold for a while yet," observed Pete. "But hurry up, Cap. Isn't it all done?"

"Just have to fasten the string on, then we'll go up in the big lot."

It did not take long to put the finishing touches to the big kite, which was taller than John, the eldest and largest of the three Smith brothers. Then, carefully carrying the big air toy, the lads went to fly it.

John, William and Pete Smith were the sons of John Smith, of Freeport, a village in one of our Eastern states. The town was located on the Waydell river, a fairly broad stream, in which the boys fished and swam in summer, and on the frozen surface of which they skated in winter. Across the river from Freeport, was the town of Vandalia, and there was more or less rivalry between the two places, on many points.

Mr. Smith owned quite a lot of property in Freeport.

It had once been a farm, and had been left to him by his father, but he gave up farming, and kept a general store in the village, as there was little money to be made in farming, he thought. He was quite well off, and the boys had a good home. Their mother had been dead some years.

The three brothers, carrying the big kite, made their way to an open meadow, on a small hill, where they found a good breeze blowing, that fine morning.

"Now you hold her, Pete," directed John, "and I'll run with it. Bill, you keep the string from getting tangled in the weeds."

"Why don't you let me run with it?" demanded William. "I can run faster than you can," which was a fact, for he was lighter than his brother.

"Maybe you can," replied John, "but you don't know how to put up a kite as well as I do."

"Aw, go on. I do so."

"Well, you ain't going to, so you can hold the string or nothing. Go on, hold the string. After I get her up. I'll let you hold it."

"All right, don't you back out, now."

"I won't. Are you all ready, Sawed-off?"

"Sure. Let her go."

Pete held the kite upright by the longer stick. He was completely hidden by the expanse of paper, which was swaying this way and that in the stiff breeze. John unwound some cord, which William, stationed half way between his two brothers, held up so that it would not tangle around the wild carrots with which the meadow abounded.

"All ready! Let go!" called John suddenly, and, as Pete released his hold, Bill following his example, John started to run.

Up into the air went the immense kite; up and up.

"Fine!" cried William. "That's the stuff!"

A moment later the affair of sticks, paste and paper turned a graceful curve and came diving down to the earth.

"Aw, why didn't you wait until I had it up before you yelled?" asked John reproachfully.

"What's the matter?" inquired Pete anxiously.

"Guess I haven't got the string on just right," said his brother. He ran back to examine the fallen kite.

"That's it," he announced. "I'll change it in a minute."

"Is it busted?" asked William.

"Not a bit. Wait a minute now, and we'll have it up."

He changed the string, and this proved effective, for, a little later the big, tailless kite was soaring in the air, high over the heads of the Smith boys.

"Does it pull much?" asked William.

"Does it?" replied John, as he carefully let out more of the extra heavy cord. "Feel of it!"

His brother tested the string.

"Say, that would lift considerable!" he exclaimed.

"We could send up a lot of lanterns on it."

"Maybe we will, to-night," put in Pete.

"It's my turn to hold it now," remarked William after a pause. "You promised, Cap."

"Sure I did. I will in a minute. Wait until I let out a little more string."

Presently the cord was transferred to William. The wind was freshening and the kite pulled so that the boy had to wrap the cord around his waist to prevent it from cutting his fingers. The big kite was certainly a success.

"Wish we had something to send up on it," remarked Pete when he had his turn at holding it.

"It would lift Waggles, if he was here," observed William, Waggles being the boy's dog.

"Where is he?" asked John.

"Oh, the last I saw him he was chasing Mrs. Perkins's cat down the road.

"And didn't you call him back?"

"Naw, I knew he would hurt the tabby."

"Well, Mrs. Perkins will go for us when she sees us. She'll say we did it on purpose. We get blamed for everything that happens in this town."

"Maybe we deserve some of it," admitted John, for he and his brothers were full of life, and fond of fun, and they frequently indulged in rather thoughtless pranks in search of amusements. Pranks which all boys play, but which did not seem to be appreciated by the townspeople.

"Well, it isn't my fault," said William. "Waggles was off like a shot before I thought of calling him back."

"I suppose he'll find us out here, sooner or later," went on John, who had again assumed charge of the kite. "Say, but it's pulling though!" he cried, as a particularly strong gust of wind fairly hauled him along the ground.

"Let's feel!" exclaimed his brothers, at once, and they hurried to test the tautness of the kite cord.

As they were doing this a little girl came toddling across the meadow, from a house situated on the edge of the big field.

"Hello, Susie!" exclaimed John.

"Lo," responded Susie Mantell. "What chu doin'?"

"Flying a kite," replied Pete. "Look how high up it is."

"My! It's a' most up to heaven," observed the little girl.

"Feel how it pulls," invited John, kindly, for they liked the little tot.

Susie, who was fond of the three Smith boys, made her way through the tall grass, and took hold of the string. She could not pull it in an inch, so taut was it.

Just then the spirit of mischief prompted William to make a suggestion. In fact he generally did suggest the various pranks in which he and his brothers indulged.

"I wonder if the kite would lift Susie?" he said, in a sort of absent-minded way.

"I guess it would, if we could fasten the string to her so it wouldn't hurt," agreed John.

"We could tie it to her belt," suggested Pete. "That wouldn't hurt her. We could just see if it would lift her, and we'd let her right down again. It wouldn't do any harm."

"No, I guess not; if we kept hold of the cord," said John.

"Does Susie want the kite to lift her in the air?" asked William, persuasively.

"Very high?" inquired the tot, rather anxiously.

"No, not very high. A little way. It'll be fun."

"I'll do it," agreed Susie, much delighted.

The boys had no thought of any harm, as they carefully fastened a loop of the cord to Susie's belt. Then Bill, holding the string, carefully let out some slack. The boys watched, anxious to see if the kite would really lift the little girl.

Somewhat to their surprise, for they really had not thought it was as strong as that, the big paper bird of the air actually took Susie off her feet.

"I'm going up to the sky!" she cried gleefully, as the kite, urged by a strong wind, pulled harder and harder, and lifted her several feet above the grass. "Here I go!"

"She is going up!" cried William enthusiastically. "I didn't think she would."

"Keep tight hold of the string," cautioned Pete to John.

"I will. Are you all right, Susie?"

"Yep. I like it. Make me go higher."

The little tot was laughing at the novel ride she was getting. John was cautiously paying out a few feet of cord, and Susie was being carried along by the kite, the broad belt she wore preventing her from being hurt.

"I wonder how high up she'd go," said William, as if considering the possibilities of the kite as an aeroplane.

"Quite a ways," observed John. "I guess I'd better——"

What he was about to say he never finished, for, at that instant the cord broke near where he was holding it, and, to the horror of the boys, they saw little Susie being carried off before them, hoisted high into the air by the tugging kite, while over the tops of the wild carrots trailed the end of the broken string.

"Catch it! Quick!" cried John. "Bill! Pete! Grab it!"

His brothers were nearer the swiftly moving end of cord than he was, but all three boys sprang forward.

Susie was now being rapidly carried forward and upward, and, suddenly seeming to realize her plight, she began to cry.

At that moment a woman came out of the house near the edge of the meadow. She saw the little girl being carried off by the giant kite and began to scream:

"Susie! Susie! Oh my darling Susie! What has happened?"

And she began to run across the field toward the little girl dangling at the end of the kite string.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITHOUT A THUMB

"Catch that string, Bill!" cried John desperately. "You must catch it!"

He was running as hard as he could, but his smaller brother was fleet of foot.

"If she falls now——" began Pete, but he did not have the courage to finish, for Susie was now several feet above the earth, and was still being carried upward. If the string broke with her, she would be severely hurt.

"How dare you fasten my little girl to your kite string?" demanded Mrs. Mantell. "You terrible boys."

"We—we didnt mean to," panted John. "We—we were just seeing if—if it would lift her."

"Mamma! Mamma!" cried the frightened little girl.

"Catch her! Catch her!" implored Mrs. Mantell. "She'll be killed!"

"We'll catch her!" cried William, feeling that most of the fault was his, since he had proposed it.

Pete made an ineffectual grab for the end of the kite string as it jumped past him.

"Hold it!" shouted John.

"I can't get it," replied his brother.

Mrs. Mantell, not thinking of grasping the string, only wanted to clasp the little girl. She ran after her, trying to grasp her dangling legs, but to no purpose. Once she had hold of Susie's shoes, but the tugging kite pulled them loose. The wind was now blowing a steady gale.

"Catch me! Catch me!" cried the child. "I don't want to go up to the sky, mamma!"

"Oh, my poor darling!" sobbed Mrs. Mantell. She could not run much farther.

"Can't you grab that string, Bill?" demanded John, who was now some distance in the rear.

"I've—I've tried," replied his brother. Anyone who knows what it is to chase a runaway kite, can appreciate the plight of the boys.

"There! It's caught on that weed!" shouted John, as he saw the string entangled in a bunch of wild carrots.

"I'll get it," responded William.

He made a dive, as though tackling a half back with the pigskin, who was about to make a touchdown, and felt the coils of the string in his fingers. He held on tightly, and, as the kite was urged on by the high wind, the cord burned his hand from the friction, but William was not going to let go.

"Hold it! Hold it!" yelled Pete, as he rushed up to his brother, and grasped the cord. This checked the farther progress of the kite, and, a moment later, though it took considerable of their strength, the two lads managed to haul down the big air machine, and the little girl.

As her feet touched the ground her mother rushed up, and clasped her in her arms.

"Oh, my poor child! My darling Susie!" she cried.

The little girl was not in the least hurt, though much frightened. Mrs. Mantell tried to carry her daughter away, but found that the kite, still up in the air, interfered.

"Untie this string at once!" she angrily demanded of the boys.

"Yes ma'am, right away," promised William. "As soon as my brother will come to help hold the kite," for he and Pete feared to let go long enough to unfasten the cord from Susie's belt, as the kite might pull away from the grasp of one of them.

John came running up. He took hold of the cord beyond where Susie was fastened to it, and began to haul in, his sturdy muscles proving ample for the task. Then William released Susie's belt.

"You mischievous boys!" exclaimed Mrs. Mantell, as she carried Susie in her arms toward her home. "I shall tell your father about this!"

"We—we didn't think the kite would take her up," said John. "We—we just wanted to see how strong it was."

"Well, you saw all right," snapped Mrs. Mantell, who felt that she had a right to be angry. "The idea of playing such a trick as that on a little girl!"

"We—we didn't mean to," put in William.

"I dare say not, but I shall inform your father just the same!"

"What's the matter?" asked a woman's voice, and

Mrs. Mantell's sister came running across the field. "I thought I heard Susie crying," she said.

"So you did," replied Mrs. Mantell. "She was being carried up by a kite."

"By a kite! Why! The very idea!. Who did it?"

"Oh, those Smith boys! They're always up to some mischief! It's a shame! I wish they'd move out of town!"

Mrs. Mantell and her sister were some distance away from the three lads, who, however, heard what she said.

"That's right; blame everything on 'those Smith boys.' We do everything," murmured William.

"Well, we did this, at any rate," observed John. "I didn't think the kite would take her up."

"And I guess you didn't think the string would break," added Pete. "That caused the whole trouble. It wasn't our fault."

"Of course not," declared John. "But I guess we'd better take the kite down. The wind's so strong it may break the sticks."

They hauled in on the string, John winding it up on a reel, while William and Pete pulled.

"Do you s'pose she'll tell dad?" ventured Pete, as he and his brothers started for home.

"Probably," replied John. "Well, we didn't mean any harm."

That was generally the excuse the Smith boys offered when anything went wrong.

As the lads were tramping over the meadow they saw, just ahead of them, a man, standing near the

highway, which was separated from the field by a rail fence.

"Wonder who he is?" spoke Pete.

"Stranger around here," added William, in a low voice.

The man, looking up, saw the boys.

"Been flying your kite?" he asked pleasantly. "My, but that's a big one," he added, as he took hold of one edge of it. "And it hasn't any tail, either."

"They're less trouble without a tail," observed John, and he looked closely at the man. Though the stranger was well dressed, there was a curious air about him that the boys did not like. He had a shifting glance, and seldom looked them straight in the eyes, his gaze wandering from one to the other.

"We didn't know how to make those kites when I was a lad," went on the stranger. "We always had to use a tail. This is a great improvement. I expect you boys will be making an air ship soon."

"Hardly," said Pete.

"Do you live around here?" asked the man, as he still kept hold of the kite, and appeared to be examining the manner in which it was made.

"Right over there," said John, pointing to their house, a big white one, which could be seen from the meadow.

"Ah, that's a fine place. Does your mother take boarders?"

"Our mother is dead," answered John, "and I'm sure dad wouldn't take boarders. Mrs. Murdock, the housekeeper, says we're worse than any boarders."

"Ah," said the man, as if amused. "Do you happen to know if there is any one in town who takes boarders?"

"Mrs. Johnson does," said Pete.

"No she don't," spoke William.

"She does too!"

"Well, she does, but I heard her daughter say the other day that their house was full."

"In that case," went on the man, "I had better not apply there."

"Mrs. Anderson sometimes takes boarders," said John.

"Where does she live?"

"In a red house, just beyond the turn there," and Cap pointed to it.

"Then I think I shall apply there. Who shall I say sent me?"

It was an invitation for the lads to tell their names.

"We're the Smith boys," said John, with a little laugh.

"It's rather an uncommon one," he added jokingly, "and it's spelled S-m-i-t-h."

"Seems to me I've heard that name somewhere before," went on the stranger, with a laugh. "My name's Randell. I think I will go see Mrs. Anderson."

As he spoke he let go of the kite, but a puff of wind, catching on the big expense of paper, swayed it so that it seemed about to fall, and Mr. Randell, thinking he had knocked it over, put out his other hand to steady it. As he did so John started, and half uttered an exclamation.

tion, which he quickly checked, but not before the man had looked curiously at him.

William took up the kite, and, as Mr. Randell moved away, having thanked the boys for their information, the three lads resumed their way.

"Good-bye," called the man, pleasantly. "Perhaps I shall see you again."

"Perhaps," answered John.

He seemed laboring under some excitement, and, when he was out on the highway, some distance away from the man, who went in the opposite direction, John said:

"Say, boys, did you notice that man's hand?"

"Which one?" inquired Pete.

"The one he put on the kite last—his left one."

"Not particularly," said William. "Why?"

"Because, he hadn't any thumb on it!"

"No thumb?" questioned Pete.

"Nope. It had been cut off close to his palm."

"Well, what of it? Maybe he was in some accident."

"What of it?" repeated John. "Say don't you remember the description of that fellow wanted for robbing the express company? His picture's in the post office, and there's a reward of five hundred dollars for his arrest. His thumb is cut off!"

"Are you sure?" asked Pete, excitedly.

"Positive," replied John. "I was reading the notice only yesterday."

"Let's go tell the police," proposed William. "Maybe we can get the reward."

"Let's watch and see which way he goes," said John.

"I think he suspects something. He caught me looking at his thumb, and I was just going to ask him how it happened, when I stopped in time."

The boys turned and looked down the road after the man. As they did so they saw another stranger come from the bushes that lined the highway, and join him. The two stood and conversed for a moment, and then struck off on a little path that led through a clump of trees.

"He's not going to Mrs. Anderson's," said William. "I guess he only questioned us for fun. He was waiting to meet that fellow."

"It looks so," admitted John, staring at the place where the man without a thumb, and his companion had disappeared. "It looks sort of funny; doesn't it?"

"Let's go down to the police station," proposed Pete. "Maybe we can get the reward. I'll bet he's the robber!"

CHAPTER III.

MR. SMITH IS ROBBED

"What'll we do with the kite?" asked Pete, as they started off.

"Leave it in the house, of course," replied William.

"What? Go way up to the house, before we go to the post office and see about that reward notice?" objected Pete. "Let's go to the post office first."

"But we can't carry this kite through town. It'll be busted."

"You take the kite up to the house, Sawed-off," suggested John.

"And let you and Bill go and claim that reward? I will not! Here, hide the kite under the fence until we get back."

As it would be considerably out of their way to go to their home, and as the boys were anxious to confirm their suspicion about the stranger, they did not want to lose any time.

"I guess Pete's plan is all right," admitted John. "No one will find the kite. We'll hide it."

They shoved it behind some bushes, near the fence, and having satisfied themselves that it could not readily be seen, they started off. As they neared the main part of the town they saw several lads of their acquaintance.

"There's Doc Lutken," observed Pete.

"Don't call him," cautioned John.

"And there's 'Bat-Eye' Jones," added William, referring to a lad whose first name was Windsor, but who was always called "Bat-Eye" from the fact that he could see well in the dark.

"Hello, Cap," cried Bat-Eye.

John waved his hand in greeting, considering that sufficient, without replying.

"Where you going?" asked "Doc," who's father was a physician.

"We'll be back in a little while," said William, considering that the best answer to make in order not to induce the two lads to follow them, for the Smith boys wanted to be alone when they looked at the reward notice, and compared the description with that of Mr. Randell.

"He's got nerve to stay around here, after doing that robbery," observed William.

"Who?" asked John.

"That fellow we met—Randell," replied his brother.

"Maybe it isn't him."

"Sure it is. Wasn't his thumb off?"

William thought this argument unanswerable.

"Well, the money was stolen from the Northville express office," said John. "That's fifty miles from here. Maybe he's trying to hide around here."

"Well, we're after him," added Pete, with fervor.

The three brothers continued on down the street toward the post office. They were obviously in a hurry, and this was observed by two lads who stood on a corner, looking in a drug store window. These lads were

Joe Langdon, nicknamed "Spider" because of his thin legs, and Sam or "Beantoe" Pudder, the title having been conferred upon him because he was always stumbling when he walked. The lads were cronies, and, because of their rather mean traits, were not in good favor with the Smith boys or their chums.

"Look at Cap Smith and his brothers," observed Beantoe.

"Yes," answered Spider. "I wonder where they're going?"

"Looks as if they were in a hurry. Let's follow 'em, and see what they're up to."

"All right. I'd like to play a trick on Bill. He punched me the other day."

"What for?"

"Aw, just because I tried to trip him up."

"I owe Pete one, myself. He cut my kite string the other day."

"Come on then; maybe we can both get even."

Sauntering along, as if with no particular object in view, the two cronies followed the Smith boys.

Our three heroes hurried on to the post office. There were not many persons in it, and they crowded around the bulletin board where there were many legal notices, as is usual in small towns, and a number of reward offers, principally for lost objects. The principal one, however, was the reward for the arrest of a thief who had stolen a substantial sum from the express office at Northville, about two weeks previously. The boys eagerly read the description of the man wanted.

"Pshaw! That ain't him!" exclaimed John in disgust.

"Why not?" inquired Pete.

"Because this fellow's lost a finger and thumb from his right hand."

"Well, maybe you didn't notice that Randell's finger was gone, also," suggested William.

"Yes I did," answered his brother. "His thumb was all that was off, and it was from his left hand, not his right. Besides, the rest of the description doesn't fit him at all."

After once more reading through the reward poster, Pete and William were forced to admit that John was right.

"Then he isn't the thief at all," said Pete, in great disgust.

"Doesn't seem so," admitted John. "Come on, we'd better be getting home."

"I'll bet he's some sort of a criminal," declared William, as they left the post office.

"Why?" asked John.

"Because he seems so. Didn't he strike you as being rather suspicious?"

"Well, I didn't just like his manner," admitted John.

"He seemed sort of shifty. But then, that's nothing."

"And he didn't go to Mrs. Anderson's, after we told him about her taking boarders," put in Pete.

"Well, maybe he changed his mind. A man's got a right to do that if he wants to. Come on. Let's get our kite, and get home. It's past dinner time."

The boys hurried through the town, took their kite

from where they had left it, and were soon at their house.

"Well, boys, you are late to dinner again," said Mr. Smith, a kindly faced man, but who, since his wife had died, appeared to find the task of bringing up three boys, rather more than he had bargained for.

"Couldn't help it, dad," explained John. "We thought we saw a chance to make money, and we couldn't let it slip," and he told about their encounter with the stranger.

Mr. Smith laughed.

"Foolish lads," he said. "Probably the man was some gentleman looking for a nice quiet place in the country. He would be very much shocked if he knew you took him for a robber."

"Well, he isn't, according to the poster," said John. "What's for dinner, dad?"

"Roast beef, I think. Mrs. Murdock rang the bell a long time ago, but I thought I'd wait for you. Where have you been?"

"Putting up our big, new kite," said William.

"Yes, and we had quite an adventure," went on John, determined to tell his father about Susie, before Mrs. Mantell had a chance..

"I know about it," interrupted his father, somewhat sternly. "I must say you boys are getting too risky. The little girl might have been injured."

"How—how did you hear of it?" asked Pete.

"Mrs. Mantell was here to complain about you. She was right. You should not take such chances. I told

her if I heard of you doing such a thing again, I would punish you."

"We—we didn't mean——" began John.

"That's just it," said his father. "You never mean to do anything, but you seem to be always getting into mischief. It must stop. You must think a bit before you do anything."

"We only wanted to test the kite," put in William.

"Well, the test was more than satisfactory, I should judge," said his father, dryly. "Now come to dinner, and don't let me hear any more complaints about you."

The boys promised, and went into the house. As they entered the dining room they saw their father's desk open, and a pile of bills on it.

"Hello! Where'd all the mony come from?" asked John. "Have you been getting a reward, dad?"

"No," replied Mr. Smith. "I forgot that I went out leaving my desk open. That money is some that I received from selling a piece of land. I had no use for it, and I need some cash in my business. Mr. Fenton made me a good offer, and I accepted it. I must put this in the bank this afternoon."

But Mr. Smith was so busy that afternoon that he had no time to go to the bank, and he did not think to send either of his sons, who again took out the big kite, and, in company with Doc Lutken, Bat-Eye Jones and Norton Tonkin, had much fun flying it.

When the Smith boys got home early that evening, they saw their father standing in the dining room, holding a pile of bills in his hand.

"More money, dad?" asked John.

"No, this is the same," answered Mr. Smith with a smile. "To tell the truth I forgot to put in the bank, and I was just thinking of the best place to keep it over night."

"Better take it down to the store, and put it in the safe, suggested Pete.

"No, I don't like to leave a large sum in the store over night. I'd rather keep it in the house."

"How much is it?"

"Three thousand dollars. I wish Mr. Fenton had given me a check, instead, but he is peculiar, and likes to pay out and receive cash. But I think if I hide the money here it will be safe, and in the morning I will bank it."

"Put it in your shoe and hide your shoe under the bed, dad," suggested Pete. "A burglar would never think of looking there for it."

"No, I think I will put it in the secret drawer of my desk. It will be safer there," answered Mr. Smith, and this he did. The secret drawer was one known to only himself and the boys, and was opened by pushing a small, concealed knob.

That night William, who was a light sleeper, was awakened by hearing a queer noise down stairs. It sounded like the breaking of glass, and he was about to get up, and arouse his brothers, to make an investigation, when he heard some cats howling.

"I guess it was the cats, breaking a bottle, or something," he said to himself, and he turned over and went to sleep again.

It was rather late when the three brothers got up,

as it was vacation time, and there was no school. As they were dressing they heard their father moving about in the dining room below. Suddenly he called out:

“Boys! Have any of you been at my desk?”

“No. Why?” replied John, while he and his brothers, with a feeling of uneasiness, waited for his answer.

“Because,” said Mr. Smith, “it’s been broken open, and the money has been stolen from the secret drawer! I’ve been robbed of three thousand dollars! And a number of other things, including some papers and trinkets have also been taken.”

CHAPTER IV

SEARCHING FOR THE THIEF

The news so startled the boys that they did not know what to do or say, at first. Then John called out:

"Are you sure it's gone, dad?"

"Sure? Why of course I am! I'm looking at the broken desk, and the smashed drawer now. Hurry down. We must notify the police, and get after the robber."

The boys lost no time in dressing. They hurried down, finishing their toilets on the way, and soon were standing about Mr. Smith, who was gazing at the smashed desk, as though, somewhere about it, he would find his three thousand dollars.

"How'd the thief get in?" asked William.

"I don't know," replied Mr. Smith. He was nervous and much upset.

"Through the window, I'll bet," said William. "I heard a noise in the night, as if some one broke a pane of glass."

"Why in the world didn't you call some one?" John wanted to know.

"Because I heard cats howling, and I thought it was one of the tabbies, that had broken a milk bottle."

"Maybe the burglar made a noise like a cat, when he broke the glass, so as to fool us," suggested Pete.

"That's a great theory," declared John. "Let's take a look around, and see how he got in."

"One of you had better go for the police," suggested Mr. Smith. "Marshall Denby can't do much; he's too old, and the four or five constables we have aren't much better, but maybe the marshall will send to Spragueville for a detective."

"I'll go and ask him," volunteered John. "But first let's take a look around, and be sure the money's not here somewhere."

"Of course it's not here," said his father. "Whoever broke open the desk took the money. That's what they did it for. But I don't see how any one knew about it, especially the secret drawer."

"Maybe they discovered that when they smashed open the top of the desk," suggested Pete.

"Probably," admitted his father gloomily. "This is a terrible loss to me!"

"Will it be serious, father?" asked John, noting his parent's despondent manner.

"Very serious. I had to raise money to meet some heavy payments, and I need more in my business. Now it is gone."

"Maybe you'll get it back," suggested William.

"I fear not. I am afraid I will have to close out my store, and go to work, if the money is not found."

"Then we'll find it, dad!" exclaimed John. "We'll get some clues, and we'll trace that robber."

"Easier said than done," remarked Mr. Smith. "But we are losing time. We must notify the police."

"Wait until I take a look around," said John, and

he glanced about the dining room, where the big, old-fashioned desk was.

"Oh, Mr. Smith, the kitchen window is all broken!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Murdock, the housekeeper, entering the room at that moment. "Why? What has happened?" she added as she saw the broken desk, and noted the serious faces of Mr. Smith and his sons. "What ever is the matter?"

"A robbery," said Mr. Smith, briefly. "My desk was broken open last night, and three thousand dollars taken!"

"Oh! Oh! How terrible!" cried the housekeeper. "Robbers! And to think of me sleeping quietly in my bed! I might have been murdered, and I never would have known a thing about it."

"Oh, I guess you would," remarked William in a low voice.

"What's that you said about the kitchen window being open?" asked John.

"It's all smashed. The one over the sink."

"Then that's how the burglar got in!" cried Pete. "Come on, let's have a look!"

They went into the kitchen. A large pane in the window over the sink had been broken. The glass was scattered all about, and the window was partly up.

"See if there are any traces outside," directed John.

William and Pete ran out of the back door. Their excited shouts soon told that they had discovered something. Mr. Smith and John hurried out.

"He stood upon the step ladder, to reach the window," said William, pointing to the ladder which rested

against the house. The window over the sink, being higher than the others, made this necessary.

"He stood on the ladder to open the window," went on Pete, "and he must have gotten out the same way. He smashed a pane, slipped back the catch, and the rest was easy. That was the breaking glass you heard, William."

"I guess it was. I wish I had called some one."

"So do I," added Mr. Smith, "but there's no use in worrying over that now. Let us see if there are any other traces."

They looked about for foot prints, but either they were not skillful enough to see any, or the hard ground had retained no traces.

"We'll take another look inside," proposed John.

He closely examined the broken window. Suddenly he uttered a cry.

"What's the matter? Cut yourself on the glass?" asked his father anxiously.

"No; but I think the burglar did."

"What do you mean?"

"There are traces of blood here, and he evidently washed himself in the sink."

"If he has a bad cut, we may be able to trace him more easily," said Mr. Smith. "He may have to have medical treatment."

"Look here!" called John quickly, pointing to something on the wall, near the window jamb.

"What is it?" asked William.

"A bloody mark left by the burglar's hand. After he

cut himself he rested his hand against the wall, either in getting in or out of the window. See, the mark is quite plain! And look!" added John quickly. "See what sort of a mark it is!"

He was greatly excited.

"What it it?" asked Pete.

"It's a mark of a hand without a thumb! A left hand!"

"The man we met in the meadow!" cried William. "The man without a thumb—Mr. Randell—let's see if we can't find him!"

"A man without a thumb!" repeated Mr. Smith. "Is that the man you thought was the express robber?"

"That's him," replied John. "Only he wasn't. But he's the one who took your three thousand dollars all right dad, and we'll see if we can't find him! We must tell the police at once, and then make some inquiries, to see if he went to Mrs. Anderson's. After that——"

John paused. He could not think of the next best thing to do.

"And after that we'll go to the new railroad camp," finished William.

"The new railroad camp?"

"Yes. There are all sorts of men hanging around there, and maybe the man without a thumb may have been there. We'll make some inquiries of the construction gang. Come on, fellows."

"Wait a moment," suggested Mr. Smith. "We ought to find some way of preserving that imprint of the

bloody hand, without a thumb. It may prove useful as evidence, or for a clue."

"Of course," assented John. "Well, we can peel off the patch of wall paper which has it on. You do that, dad, while we go notify the police."

CHAPTER V

AT THE RAILROAD CAMP

Taking a thin, sharp knife Mr. Smith prepared to take off the piece of wall paper, while his sons, eager to begin their search for the robber, hurried to the police station. Marshall Denby was so startled by the news that he hardly knew what to do.

"A robbery you say?" he asked. "Right here in town? Why I never heard of such a thing! And me, and Hank Edwards, and Sim Trollop, and Si Bascomb patrolling the streets all night! Why, we never seen nothin' of him!"

"Very likely not," observed John, "but he was at our house all right. Father wants to know if you'll notify the detectives at Spragueville."

"Course I will, if he wants me to, but me and my constables can do jest as much good. I'll go up, and look for some clues, and then I'll get right after that villian. The idea! A burglary right here in town! Three thousand dollars! Say, that'll come hard on your father, John."

"I'm afraid it will. Well, we'll be getting back Mr. Denby. Don't forget to notify the police at Spragueville."

"I'll not. The idea! A robbery right here in town!" and it seemed as if the marshall could not understand how such a thing had happened.

The boys hurried home to tell their father of their visit to the police, and found Mr. Smith making an inspection of the grounds about the house.

"I'm looking for traces of the thief," he explained. "I wonder why Waggles didn't bark?"

"That's so; where is the dog?" asked William.

"He hasn't been around since yesterday," said his father.

"Maybe he's chasing that cat yet," remarked Pete. "He's getting so he stays away from home a lot lately."

"That sounds like him barking now," observed John. "Yes that's him," he added, and presently there came running into the yard a much-bedraggled dog.

"He's been out in the woods all night," said William, with a glance at the animal's coat, which was thick with burrs and brambles. "That the way you keep watch; is it, Waggles? You're a fine dog, you are!"

Waggles seemed to feel the reproof in the lad's voice, and, dropping his tail between his legs he slunk along, fearing a beating.

"Oh, I'm not going to touch you," went on William. "But you'll stay chained up the rest of day, and we'll see how you like that."

He took the dog to the kennel, and then, he and his brothers having made a hasty breakfast, started for the railroad camp.

The railroad was an extension of the Green Valley line, and was slowly approaching Freeport. There were many rumors concerning the work, and it was a source of much wonder to the people of Freeport, and its rival

town across the river, Vandalia, just what the railroad owners were going to do.

The line would cross the Waydell river somewhere in the vicinity of the two towns, but it made all the difference in the world whether it came through Freeport, and established a station there, or continued on to Vandalia, and made that its halting place.

As far as the railroad was concerned it made little difference, from an engineering or financial standpoint, in which town it built a station. It could do it equally well in either, and the matter had not yet been decided. The managers of the enterprise had left it all to their chief surveyor, who was to run the line in the best way, and place the depot where he thought it would be most to the advantage of the road.

But it made a great deal of difference to the two towns. That which the railroad came to would increase in population, the real estate would be more valuable, and business would boom. The town that did not get the railroad would probably lose much of its population, business would suffer and it would never prosper.

So there was more rivalry than ever between Freeport and Vandalia when it became known that the railroad was coming. Each town wanted it, and did its best to get the managers to promise to build the depot within its borders. But, so far, no decision had been reached. The head surveyor, Mr. Jason Stanton felt that there was plenty of time to decide, as the end of the line was still several miles from the Waydell river. He said he would make known, before the end of summer, which town would get the road and the depot.

It seemed that Vandalia stood the best chance, as it was not so far down the river as was Freeport, and the railroad could reach it easier. To get to Freeport a little longer line would have to be built. The people of Vandalia rejoiced in this, and many of them were counting on the time when the line would reach them, and business would increase.

On the other hand Mr. Smith, and some of the merchants of Freeport declared that their town offered the most advantages for the railroad, as it was nearer to a large farming community, which would provide plenty of freight for the road.

It was to the construction camp of the Green Valley line, therefor, that the three Smith brothers journeyed, in search for clues of the robber.

"Who'll we ask about it?" inquired William, as they neared the place where gangs of men were swarming about, loading dirt trains, building temporary tracks, and driving teams of horses, while the whistling of diminutive locomotives, and the puffing of steam shovels, added to the noise and confusion.

"Let's ask the foreman," suggested Pete. "He's got a shack over by that big rock."

"Maybe some of the surveying crowd would be better to tackle," suggested John.

The boys had been to the railroad camp before, and knew some of the men.

"The foreman's better natured," said Pete. "His name is Ted Carboy. Mr. Stanton, the head surveyor, is uppish."

"Then we'll tackle Mr. Carboy," decided William.

"Hey," he called to a lad who was carrying a pail of water, "where's Mr. Carboy?"

"Dunno," replied the water boy. "Last I seen of him he was goin' up that way," and the lad pointed up the track.

"Think he'll come back?" asked Pete.

"I dunno."

"Have you seen or heard of a man around here without a thumb on his left hand?" asked William, thinking he might gain some information in this way.

"A man without a thumb? Naw, but there's a feller over at that steam shovel what ain't got but one hand. Th' other was blowed off with a stick of dynamite he was thawin' last winter. Maybe he's th' feller you want."

"No, I guess not," replied John. "This man had only a thumb off. Is there any one around here in Mr. Carboy's place? Any one we ask about this man we're looking for?"

"I dunno. What's he done?"

"He robbed our father," said Pete. "He took——"

"Wa-ter!" called a distant workman, and the boy with the pail started off.

"I've got to go now," he said. "You'll find Mr. Carboy somewheres up the line," and, with a wave of his hand he hurried to give the thirsty laborers a drink.

The three brothers continued on along the roughly laid tracks. They met one of the surveyors, carrying a long pole, painted with red and black numbers.

"Have you seem Mr. Carboy?" asked John.

"Yes, he's back there, by that farthest steam



"BOYS, LOOK HERE!" EXCLAIMED JOHN, EXCITEDLY.

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shovel, replied the surveyor, "but there's no use asking for jobs. We've got all the men we want."

"We're not looking for work," said William quickly.

"Good thing; you wouldn't get it," and the surveyor laughed unpleasantly.

"There's Mr. Carboy now," exclaimed Pete a little later. They knew the foreman of the construction gang by sight. Going up to him John quickly explained their errand, ending by asking if Mr. Carboy had seen anything of a man with a wounded hand, or one with a missing thumb.

"Say!" exclaimed the foreman quickly, as John finished, "I'll bet that's the fellow I saw!"

"Where?" asked William.

"It was early this morning," went on Mr. Carboy. "I was back in the woods, looking for some long trees to use as timbers in a temporary bridge we've got to build, and I saw a fellow coming along, with a bloody handkerchief tied around his hand. When he saw me he acted as though he was afraid, and he started to turn back. Then he thought better of it, and come on.

"I asked him if he'd hurt himself, and he said he'd fallen, and got cut on a sharp stone. Then he asked me the nearest way to get to Branchmead, and I told him. I'll bet he was the chap you're looking for."

"Did he have a thumb off his left hand?" asked Pete.

"I couldn't see. That was the hand he had done up in his handkerchief."

"That's him!" declared John. "We're on his trail! Let's go to Branchmead."

"You'd better telegraph or telephone to the police

there," advised Mr. Carboy. "That's the quickest way. There's a telephone in my shack you can use."

"Thanks," said William. "That's what we'll do."

News of the robbery, and of the man without a thumb who was suspected of committing it was soon imparted to the Branchmead police, who promised to be on the lookout for the fellow.

"Have they decided where the railroad's coming yet?" asked John, as he and his brothers prepared to leave the camp.

"No, not exactly," replied Mr. Carboy. "Mr. Stanton is going to make a decision soon, though. He's got to, as we're pushing right up to the river, and he'll have to settle where the bridge is going."

"I hope it comes to Freeport," said Pete. "It will make quite a town out of the place."

"That's what Vandalia hopes, too," said Mr. Carboy. "I hear they had a meeting there, the other day, and agreed to give the land for a station free. Your town ought to do something like that. Maybe it would induce the owners to come to Freeport."

"That's a good idea," said John. "We'll tell dad. He's on the town committee."

"Come out again, some day," invited the foreman, who liked boys.

"We will," promised William, as he and his brothers started for home.

CHAPTER VI

SPIDER LANGDON'S TRICK

"Poor dad," remarked John, as they walked along over the fields. "That's a heavy loss to him."

"I wonder if it will make trouble?" spoke William.

"Of course it will," declared Pete. "Didn't you hear him say he needed the money for the store? Maybe he'll have to close it up."

"And maybe we'll have to go to work," added John.

"That wouldn't be so bad," was William's opinion.

"I'd like to get a job on the railroad."

"As water boy or one of the surveyors?" asked Pete.

"Either one, as long as I was earning money."

"Well, we'll have to wait and see what happens," said John.

"Let's take the short cut, across the brook," proposed William, a little later. "It'll save most a mile."

"All right," agreed John. "Dad's probably anxious for us to come back."

As the brothers neared the brook, taking a path which led over fields, their approach was noticed by two lads who were hidden from view by thick bushes that lined the bank of the stream. The lads were Spider Langdon and Beantoe Pudder. They were fishing, but had not had very good luck. Spider, haul-

ing in his line, when he thought he had a bite, exclaimed:

"Those blamed sunfish are nibbling off the bait."

"That's right," agreed Beantoe, getting up to take off a small fish he had pulled out, and, stumbling over a tree root. "Let's quit. This is no fun."

"All right. I'm ready."

Spider uncurled his long legs, and gazed through the bushes across the field.

"Here come the Smith gang," he said.

"That's right; all three of 'em."

"They're headed right this way. Wonder if they're going fishing?"

"Guess not. They haven't got any poles."

"They're taking the short cut," observed Spider.

"They'll cross the brook right by the old mill. Say——"

He stopped suddenly, his freckled face illuminated by an idea.

"What?" asked Beantoe.

"I've got a plan."

"What is it?"

"A chance to get even with those fellows. Let's play a trick on 'em. We owe 'em something."

"We sure do. I'm with you. What'll we do?"

"I'll show you. We'll give one or two of 'em a dip in the brook. That'll cool 'em off."

Spider and Beantoe sneaked along the edge of the brook taking care to keep well within the screen of the bushes. They reached the path along which the three Smith brothers must come, and there Spider cut off part of his fish line. This he fastened across the path,

a few inches above it, tying the ends to stout stakes driven into the ground. The cord was in such a position that it could not readily be seen, and was quite close to the edge of the brook, so that a person stumbling against it would be pitched into the stream.

"There, I guess that'll fix 'em," observed Spider, as he tied the last knot. "Now we'll hide back here, and watch the fun."

"Don't let 'em see us," cautioned Beantoe, "if they do they'll——"

He did not finish the sentence, for he stumbled over a root sticking up, and nearly fell.

"If you do that again, it'll give the whole thing away," said Spider angrily. "They're almost here."

"I couldn't help it, Spider."

"Aw, you're always stumbling! Why don't you look where you're going? Come in here, now, and hide. Keep still! Here they are!"

Meanwhile the brothers were coming along the path to the brook. The stream was quite shallow at this point, and could be crossed by means of several broad, flat stones, laid down for that purpose.

"Maybe we'll take a trip to Branchmead this afternoon," said John, as he walked along. "I think——"

The next moment he pitched forward, holding out his hands to save himself, and down he came in the brook, splashing the water all about.

William was only a few feet behind him, and, as John had not broken the stout string when he tripped over it, William's foot, too, caught in it, and he went sprawling into the brook beside his brother. Pete

stopped in time, but he would have come to no harm, as William yanked out one of the pegs in his fall.

"Are you hurt?" cried Pete, as he hastened across the fording stones to where his brothers were floundering in the water.

"No—Ugh! Blug! Puff! I'm not hurt, but I'll hurt the fellow who put that string there!" declared John, struggling to his feet.

"Same—bulb—ub—here—ugh! Splug! Mug!" mumbled William, as he got rid of a lot of water.

Meanwhile Spider and Beantoe, concealed in the bushes, were trying their best not to laugh, and so betray their presence.

"Who did it?" demanded Pete.

"I don't know. But I know I got the full benefit of it," declared John. "I wish the water had been a bit deeper. I hurt my wrist when I fell.

"I got jarred up considerable myself," added William.

Pete had picked up the string and was looking at the stakes.

"It's part of a fish line," he said.

"Yes, and somebody who did it left part of their fish behind," added William. He pointed to a small perch lying near the bushes where the two conspirators were concealed.

"Whoever did it knew we were coming," observed John.

"I wouldn't wonder but what Spider or Beantoe had a hand in this," was Pete's opinion. "They've been looking for a chance to get even with us,"

Something suspicious in the bushes caught John's eye. It was a glimpse of the checked shirt worn by Spider. John took a step toward the underbrush. The hidden lads saw him coming, and attempted to sneak away, but Beantoe's unfortunate habit of stumbling prevented. He pitched forward in the bushes, having caught his foot in a trailing vine, and the noise he made showed the Smith brothers where their enemies were hiding.

"Here they are!" cried John, as he made a dive, and caught Beantoe.

Spider tried to break through the underbrush, but William was too quick for him, and hauled him out.

"You let me alone!" demanded Spider.

"Yes, let go," added Beantoe, squirming, but John had too good a grip of him.

"What are doing in there?" asked Pete.

"Nothin'," declared Spider.

"Fishin'," said Beantoe, in the same breath.

"A lot of fish you'll catch at the ford," commented William. "Which one of you stretched that string across the path?"

Beantoe and Spider preserved a discrete silence.

"It was Spider," said Pete, with a look at the long-legged lad's pole, which he still held.

"How do you know I did it?" asked Spider, trying to twist loose.

"Your line's cut," declared Pete in triumph, "and the line across the path is the same kind," and he showed his brothers.

"You're a regular detective," sneered Spider.

"A good enough detective for that," answered Pete. "They did it all right, fellows. What'll we do to 'em?"

"Throw 'em in the brook," suggested William.

"Yes, up at the eddy, where it's deep," added Pete.

"Don't you dare do that!" cried Beantoe. "I'll—I'll have you arrested if you do."

"How about tripping us and making us fall in the water?" asked John.

"I didn't do it, Spider did it," declared Beantoe, thinking to escape by throwing all the blame on his crony.

"I did not! You helped as much as I did," declared Spider.

"Toss 'em in," said Pete. "Then let's get home."

"If you do, I'll punch your head," threatened Spider.

"I'd like to see you try," replied Pete. "Do you want to fight?"

"Now, no fighting," interposed his older brother. "We'll duck 'em, and that will even things up."

"Aw, please don't" begged Beantoe. "I'll never do it again."

"I will," declared Spider vindictively. "I'll get square with you, all right!"

"Then we'll give you something to get square about," said John.

Carrying and dragging the two lads, the Smith boys walked up stream a little distance, to where there was a deep eddy. From the bank they cast into it Spider and Beantoe, despite their struggles, and Beantoe's pleadings for mercy.

"Now swim out, and cool off," suggested William, as

he and his brothers resumed their journey home, which advice the two tricksters, being good swimmers, promptly followed.

"You just wait," called Spider after the Smith boys. "I'll get square with you all right."

"That's right," added Beantoe, leaning over to let some water run out of his left ear. "Just you wait!"

CHAPTER VII

A RUNAWAY HAND CAR

When the boys reached home they found Marshall Denby, two constables and their father, looking about the house and grounds for possible clues. Mr. Smith had carefully removed the piece of blood-stained wall paper.

"That'll be a valuable clue," declared the marshall. "I'm going to have some photographs made from it, and send 'em all over the country. We'll catch that fellow, sure."

"He must be some relation to the man who robbed the express company," said one of the constables. "Both of 'em has thumbs off."

"But on different hands," said John.

"Maybe they belong to some secret society, and they have to cut off their thumbs," suggested the marshall.

"Shouldn't wonder a bit," chimed in the other constable. "I read a book once about a band of criminals that all had their left ears missing."

"Well, that isn't going to get my three thousand dollars back," said Mr. Smith. "I guess the thief didn't leave any of it behind him."

John told what he and his brothers had accomplished, and how they had telephoned to Branchmead concerning the wounded man Mr. Carboy had seen.

"Then I guess that's all we can do at present," remarked Mr. Smith. "The police will have to do the rest."

"Yes, I'll get right back, and see about having some photographs made of this wall paper," said the marshall. "I'll let you know in case me or my men catch the robber, Mr. Smith."

"All right. Do your best."

"We will. It's the biggest robbery that ever took place in Freeport. Strange how it happened, and me not knowing a thing about it," and the aged marshall went off, dubiously shaking his head, the constables following.

"I suppose this will make a great difference in your business, dad," remarked John, when they were seated in the dining room, about the broken desk.

"Yes, it's likely to."

"Will you have to give it up?"

"I hope not. I owe considerable money, and I was counting on this to meet my bills. I think I shall have to discharge two of my clerks, and Mr. Davidson and myself will have to run things."

"Couldn't we work in the store?" asked William.

"I don't know. I hardly know what to say. I'll have to wait a few days, and consider matters. I suppose you boys could help me out. But I don't know—maybe I'll have to give up the store. I'm so worried I can't think properly now."

The boys saw that their father was in no condition to discuss matters, for the loss of his money had upset

him. So they went outside, to talk the situation over. They arrived at no satisfactory conclusion, however.

Several days passed, and there was no trace found of the thief. Nor was any of the money recovered, and, as time went on, and Mr. Smith considered his business affairs, he grew more and more worried. The boys seldom saw him, for he went away early and came home late, and when John asked him if they could help him he only answered with a shake of his head.

"I'll know how I stand in a few days," he said, a little later. "You boys can't do anything now, but maybe you can help me after—after I get matters straightened out. Meanwhile have as much fun as you can, but don't get into mischief. No more sending little girls up on kites."

"No," promised John.

"Let's take the kite out to-day," proposed William that afternoon. "We can attach a basket to the cord, and send Waggles up in it. Eh, Waggles?"

The dog nearly lost his shaggy tail, so violently did he agitate it, to show his pleasure at what was in prospect, but, fortunately for him, he did not appreciate it.

"No, let's don't fly the kite," objected Pete.

"What'll we do then?" asked John.

"Let's go up to the railroad camp. I heard Bateye Jones say they were going to do a lot of blasting to-day."

"All right, we'll go watch 'em. Mr. Carboy invited us to call."

"We ought to go fishing," remarked William. "They're biting fine down by the sycamore tree hole, so Doc Lutken was saying."

"We'll go to-morrow," answered John. "Now let's go and see 'em blast."

They spent some time in the railroad camp, watching the men working the ponderous steam shovels, that took such big mouthsfull of dirt and loaded it on the cars, running to cover when the blasts went off, and returning to see what great holes were torn in the side of the rocky cut.

"Let's go up where they're building the bridge," proposed William, after an hour spent in the main camp. The bridge was one being constructed over a small stream, about a mile back, and at the summit of a slight grade.

The boys remained there half an hour, and, looking about for some new object of interest, Pete saw a hand car on a siding.

"I wish we could take a ride on that," he remarked. "I wonder if we could?"

"If Mr. Carboy was here he'd let us," answered Pete.

"Let's try it anyhow," proposed John. "We can run it back and forth on the siding. No one will care I guess."

"Here she goes," said William, who was generally the first to do any new stunt.

The boys got aboard and began to work the handle up and down. The car moved forward, gathering speed as it went down the grade, and the faster it progressed, the harder did the boys work the handles, until they were traveling quite fast.

"This is jolly!" cried William. "I wish I worked on the railroad. I'd ride home this way every night."

"It's as good fun as a bicycle," agreed Pete. "Let's take it out on the main line. No one will care."

They were approaching the switch where the siding branched off, and, as they were quite near it a voice shouted:

"Hi! You boys get off that hand car!"

"It's one of the surveyors," said William. "Shall we duck?"

"Naw, go on," insisted Pete.

"Better not," advised John.

"Get off there!" cried the man again. "Put that car back on the siding! A dirt train is coming!"

"Then we'd better get out of the way!" exclaimed William. "Here goes! Come on, fellows!"

He leaped from the car, for the surveyor was running toward them. Pete paused long enough to apply the foot brake, while John tried to stay the progress of the car by bracing against the swiftly moving handles, going up and down. But the car was on the down grade, and, instead of losing speed, was gathering momentum.

"I can't stop her!" cried Pete.

"Me either," added John.

"Jump, fellows," advised William.

The hand car was now out on the main track, where the grade of the temporary line was greater. Not wanting to remain on the vehicle, as the puffing of an approaching dirt train could be heard, and being unable to stop the hand car, the two Smith boys were forced to jump. They landed in some soft sand, and were only jarred.

"Hi! Stop that car!" cried the surveyor. "Stop it I say!"

"We can't," answered William.

"It'll go right into camp," went on the man, running in vain after the car.

"Too bad," remarked John, but he did not seem to be very sorry.

"We'd better get out of here," said Pete.

"That's right, Sawed-off," admitted William. "Something may happen. Come on!"

They started to run, fearful of being caught by the surveyor, who was making frantic signals. The hand car was rolling on, faster and faster. Down the main track it rumbled, and the speed was increasing every moment, for the grade was steep.

"It can't do much damage," remarked William, as if that was some consolation. "It's light."

"I'm afraid we'll get into trouble," said John, as he and his brothers hurried on. He little knew just how much trouble the thoughtless prank was to cause, nor what far-reaching results it would have.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT THE HAND CAR HIT

Seated in his tent, at the foot of the grade, was Mr. Jason Stanton, chief surveyor of the Green Valley railroad. His tent was filled with instruments, books, maps, tables of figures, blue prints, frames for making them, a few chairs and a large table. It was over this table that Mr. Stanton was bending, making some calculations about a new curve in the line.

"Hum," he mused. "I must soon settle about which way the road is going to run in order to cross the river. I wonder if it would be best to let it touch Freeport, or not go down quite so far, and build a depot at Vandalia? The people there seem to be more progressive than in Freeport, and it would be a little easier to run the line there. But I think it will be best, in the end, to touch Freeport."

He paused in his musings, did some calculating, looked over a map of the surrounding country, and then leaned back in his chair.

"I really think I'll run the road to Freeport," he said. "As long as they've left it to me to decide, and as it doesn't make much difference from an engineering standpoint, I think we'll go to Freeport. I suppose the people of Vandalia will be much disappointed, as I

understand they are counting on the line coming there. But I can't please both places, and I think we'll go to Freeport. I'll just notify the Board of Trade there. They wanted me to let them know, so as to prepare for a boom in business. I guess I'll write them a letter."

Mr. Stanton got out a pen and a sheet of paper. He sat down to his desk, and had just dipped his pen in the ink, when a curious rumbling sound caught his ear.

"What's that?" he said. "Sounds like a car coming down the grade."

Then he heard the whistle of one of the small locomotives.

"A dirt train, I guess," he went on. "They're running too fast though, for a temporary track. I must speak to Carboy about it."

Mr. Stanton started to write the letter to the president of the Freeport Board of Trade, informing him, that, inside of a year, the railroad would be at his town. He had gotten as far as "My Dear Sir," when something happened.

The rumbling of the runaway hand car became louder. It was a shrill roar now, as the vehicle thundered down the line.

Now, as it happened, there was, just outside Mr. Stanton's tent, a small tank, filled with water, perched upon some upright stakes, driven into the ground near the track. The water was to supply the boiler of a stationary engine, which was used in the railroad construction work. Just at the point where the water tank was, the track curved.

The hand car, going at high speed, struck this curve, and promptly jumped the track. It went hurtling against the uprights that supported the tank, and snapped them off, as if they were toothpicks.

This, of course, brought the water tank down, but, fortunately for Mr. Stanton, the debris was sufficient to stop the progress of the car, or that might have continued right on into his tent.

As it was the water tank being turned upside down, spilled out all the contents, and these contents poured like a small flood, right into the canvas shelter of the chief surveyor.

The crash of the car striking the tank supports was instantly followed by the deluge, and Mr. Stanton's letter writing was forcibly interrupted. He felt a great wave washing over him, all about him were splinters of wood. The tent collapsed, and, when he had time to look about him, he found himself in a puddle of water, underneath a table, while, all around him, were books, papers, blue prints and his surveying instruments.

At first he thought a cloud burst had occurred, but when he heard no succeeding thunder, but, instead, the noise of rushing feet, and many shouts, he imagined that a dynamite explosion had taken place.

He got up, shook the water from his clothing, looked at the ruin and devastation on all sides, and started to crawl from the collapsed tent. As he emerged he saw running toward him a number of the surveyors, trackmen, and Mr. Carboy.

"Are you hurt?" asked the foreman.

"No—that is I think not very much," replied the chief surveyor. "Was any one else hurt?"

"No. I believe not."

"Where was the explosion?" asked Mr. Stanton.

"Explosion?" repeated Mr. Carboy. "There wasn't any explosion."

"No? What was it then?" asked the bewildered surveyor.

"A runaway hand car. It struck the water tank, and knocked it over."

"A runaway hand car? How did it get on the main line?"

"That's more than I know," answered the foreman.

"You'd better find out," went on Mr. Stanton. "None of the construction gang should have had a hand car out on the main line this time of day."

"I know it. I'll look into it. It must have surprised you."

"Surprised is hardly the word," remarked Mr. Stanton, as he wrung some of the water from his coat. "Look at my tent! It's worse inside than it is out. Help me lift it up. I must dry my instruments."

Under the direction of the foreman some of his laborers soon had the tent lifted to one side. Then Mr. Carboy assisted Mr. Stanton in picking up the papers and books.

"A lot of blue prints destroyed," remarked the surveyor. "Some of my tables of calculations spoiled. My books all wet, and a suit ruined. You'll discharge who ever's responsible for this, Mr. Carboy."

"I certainly will. It's lucky you weren't hurt."

He went to where the hand car had come to rest in a pile of sand, after turning completely over.

"It's the car that was on the hill siding," he remarked. "There was no excuse for using that."

Just then the surveyor, who had warned the Smith boys off the car, came hurrying up. He was out of breath, for he had run far.

"Any—one—hurt?" he gasped.

Then he saw the collapsed tent, and beheld the dripping figure of the chief surveyor.

"Oh," was all he said.

Something in the man's air attracted the attention of Mr. Carboy.

"Did you see this car start?" he asked.

"I did," replied the surveyor, "but I couldn't step it, and there was no way of warning any one."

"Who put it on the main line?" asked the foreman.

"Some boys. Three of 'em. The same ones who came over one morning and asked you about a man they said had robbed their father."

"Those Smith boys!" exclaimed the foreman.

"Who?" asked the chief surveyor quickly.

"Those Smith boys, of Freeport."

"Freeport, eh?" and there was a queer look on Mr. Stanton's face.

"They were fooling with it," went on the man who had seen the beginning of the accident. "I warned them off, but they didn't go until it was too late. Then the car ran from the siding onto the main track, and

they jumped off. I ran, but I couldn't catch them or the car."

"Hum," remarked Mr. Stanton slowly. Then he looked at the scene of ruin all about, at the broken water tank, his wrecked tent, and his scattered papers.

"I'll look into this," he said. "Mr. Robinson, I wish you'd write a letter for me. I want it sent at once, and I can't attend to it until I clean up a bit."

"Yes, sir," replied the surveyor, who had seen the prank of the Smith boys. "Who to?"

"One to the Board of Trade of Freeport. Say I have decided that the railroad will not come there. I have seen a sample of the youth of that town, and I can't say I like their manners. Any boys who would play such pranks as this would do something worse. They might wreck a train, some day, just for fun. No railroad for Freeport. That is my decision. The other letter you may write to the Board of Trade of Vandalia."

"Yes, sir."

"State that the Green Valley railroad will be there inside of a year."

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Robinson, starting for his work tent.

"Those Smith boys, eh," mused Mr. Stanton, as he took off his wet coat. "Well, I guess the citizens of Freeport will find that it doesn't pay to raise such a crop of youngsters. I like fun as well as any one, but I don't call this fun. It will cost their town the railroad."

And, as Mr. Stanton had the deciding voice, and as

he was naturally very much incensed at what had happened, Freeport was destined to suffer.

Meanwhile the Smith boys, all unaware of what had taken place, but fearing that some mischief had followed their thoughtless play, were hurrying toward home.

CHAPTER IX

A BOTTLE OF PAREGORIC

"Where do you s'pose that hand car landed?" asked William, as he and his brothers took a roundabout way back to Freeport.

"I don't know," replied John. "I only hope it didn't hurt any one."

"Do you think it might?" inquired Pete anxiously.

"Sure, it might," said John. "Probably, though, it ran into a heap of dirt, and stopped. Anyhow, we couldn't help it. We didn't mean to start it down grade on the main line."

"Of course not," added Pete, "but if something has happened, and we say we didn't mean to do it, I know what dad will say."

"What?" asked John.

"He'll get mad, and say that's always our excuse."

"Well, it is," spoke William frankly. "Who'd a' thought the hand car would ever go so fast? I hope that surveyor didn't recognize us."

"Oh, he did all right," was Pete's opinion.

"Well, we can't help it now," said William. "Hello! there's a good apple tree. Let's get some."

They scrambled over a fence into an orchard, and were soon filling their pockets with the half ripe fruit, eating some as they picked.

"Um! Say these ain't good!" exclaimed William, biting into a juicy specimen.

"All to the lolly-pop!" added Pete. "Let's come here with a basket to-morrow. I wonder who they belong to, anyhow?"

"This is part of Sam Bogard's land," said John. "I guess he won't care if we help ourselves. Oh, there's a dandy big one."

He threw a stone at a particularly fine red apple, one that was riper than any of the others. It came down with a thud, but, at that moment a voice cried out:

"Hey! What you boys doin' in my orchard? Git out of thar! The idee of knockin' off my apples! Clear out now, or I'll set the dogs after you!"

"Run!" counseled Pete to his brothers.

"Aw, he ain't got no dogs," said William, but he ran just the same, and so did John. They flung themselves over the fence, and hurried across the field.

"If I catch you fellers in here ag'in I'll have ye arrested!" cried the angry Mr. Bogard, as he reached the fence, and, leaning over it, shook his fist at the boys. "The idee of knockin' off my best apples! I'll have th' law on ye, that's what I'll do. I know ye! You're th' Smith boys, from Freeport. Clear out now, an' don't let me catch ye around here ag'in! The idee!"

The boys ran on in silence. Presently, finding themselves safe from pursuit, they slackened their pace.

"Who'd a' thought he was around?" asked Pete, as if Mr. Bogard had no right to be in his own orchard.

"He caught us all right," observed John, selecting

another apple from his pocket, and beginning to eat the juicy fruit.

"He's making a lot of fuss about a few apples," spoke William.

"Well, Bill, I think we've got about half a peck between us," remarked Pete. "I didn't think we took so many."

"He'll never miss 'em, Sawed-off," retorted his brother.

"I s'pose he'll tell dad," said John with a sigh. "We seem to be getting in lots of trouble lately."

"Don't worry, Cap," said Pete. "We had some fun, and we got some apples."

"But we haven't got that robber yet," put in William, recurring to the theft of his father's money.

"No, and I don't believe we ever will," added John. "Dad seems to be worrying more than ever about it."

"I guess you would, too," observed Pete. "Say, here comes Doc Lutken."

"And Bateye," added William. "Hey there!" he called and the other two lads looked up. Seeing their chums they walked toward them.

"Where'd you git the apples?" asked Doc.

"Over in Bogard's orchard. He chased us, too."

"That's nothin'. Give us one."

Doc and Bateye were soon munching the fruit, and they turned back with the Smith boys, who, however, did not think it wise to say anything about their adventure with the hand car.

"What's the matter, Bill?" asked John, noticing, after

they had gone about half a mile farther, that his brother had stopped eating apples.

"I—I don't feel very good," replied William, placing his hand over the region of his stomach. "I've got a sort—a sort of pain."

"Too many apples," remarked Doc Lutken, with somewhat of the professional manner of his father.

"I guess that's it," admitted William. "Say, I've got to sit down a while."

"What'd you eat so many for?" asked John.

"I didn't eat any more than you did," retorted William.

"Well, I haven't got any pain."

"Wait a while, and maybe you'll have it. Wow! Say, it's getting worse!"

"Hold on a minute, I guess I can fix you up," said Doc. "I've got some pills here I took from dad's office."

"I'm not going to take any pills," objected William. "How do you know but they're poison?"

"There wasn't any skull and cross bones on the bottle," replied the doctor's son. "All poisons have a skull on, in red ink. Besides it said these pills were good for pain."

"Well, I'm not going to take 'em," declared the suffering lad.

"Here's some paregoric, then," said Doc, putting away the pills, and taking another bottle from his pocket. He seemed a most obliging doctor, willing to meet any whims of a patient. "I got this from dad's medicine chest. I always carry some with me. That's good for pain."

"Sure, that's good," added Pete. "We used to take it, Bill."

William was still a trifle doubtful.

"Let's smell of it," he said faintly.

He took a few whiffs from the bottle.

"That's paregoric all right," he said.

"Of course it is," declared Doc. "Think I don't know? It'll stop the pain.

"Sure, take it," advised Bateye Jones, squinting in the strong sunlight.

"Go on," added John.

The majority of opinion seeming to be in favor of him taking the medicine, William raised the bottle to his lips, and swallowed a liberal dose.

"There," said Doc with a wise air. "That'll make you feel better. Guess I'll take some myself. I ate quite a few apples."

He took a small quantity.

"Pass her over," said Bateye. "I'll have some, too."

"Same here," added Pete, and then John decided he would ward off any possible bad effects of the apples, by taking some himself.

"Feel any better?" asked Doc of William.

"A little," admitted the sufferer. "Guess I'd better have some more of that stuff, though."

The amateur physician administered some, and, after resting in the shade of some big elm trees for half an hour, the patient decided he was sufficiently recovered to walk.

"That's good stuff, all right, Doc," he said gratefully. "I'm going to carry some with me after this."

"I'll get you some," generously volunteered the physician's son. "Dad has a lot of it. I've got some court plaster, too," he added. "If any of you get cut now, I can fix you up."

"You're a regular walking drug store," commented Pete. "We came near having a use for some of your sticking plaster a while ago. We were on a——"

He stopped suddenly, on the verge of saying something about the hand car incident.

"Well, what?" asked Doc, while Bateye looked squintingly at the Smith boys.

"Nothing," replied Pete. "There goes a rabbit!" he suddenly cried, as the furry creature bounded through the tall grass. "Let's chase him! If we only had Waggles here now, but I s'pose he's after a cat," and he led in the pursuit of the frightened rabbit.

CHAPTER X

AN INDIGNATION MEETING

The letter which Mr. Stanton, the head surveyor of the Green Valley railroad caused to be written to the Freeport Board of Trade, was received by Simeon Dent, president of that organization, the day after the hand car incident. Mr. Dent was very much astonished to get it, and he was very angry when he read that the cause of the railroad not coming to Freeport was the conduct of the Smith boys.

"I'll go see Mr. Smith right away," he decided. "Then I'll call a meeting. Then we'll see if we can't induce Mr. Stanton to change his mind. The idea! Those Smith boys are getting worse and worse every year for mischief! I wish they'd move away. Yet Mr. Smith is a nice man, and we all like him."

Mr. Dent lost no time in calling on Mr. Smith. Something in his manner made the father of our three heroes a bit apprehensive, and it was with a somewhat worried air that he noted the progress of the president of the Board of Trade, up the aisle of the store, over which Mr. Smith was then presiding.

"I've come on an unpleasant errand, Mr. Smith," said Simeon Dent.

"I—er—hope it's not about the money I owe you,"

said Mr. Smith. "As you know I've had a heavy loss, and——"

"It's not about the money," said Mr. Dent, "though of course I shall have to have that soon. However, we can talk of that later. This time I came to see you about your boys."

"Have they—have they been getting into trouble again?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Yes, they have, and serious trouble, too."

"I hope none of them is hurt!" exclaimed their father.

"No, they're not hurt," went on Mr. Dent severely, "but the town has been hurt by their conduct. And very seriously hurt, too."

"I'm afraid I don't exactly understand. You see I've been very much upset over that robbery, and——"

"I appreciate that. If you'll read that letter it will tell you all about it. It is a very serious matter."

Mr. Smith read the surveyor's account of the runaway hand car and the damage it had caused. Then he came to the part accusing the Smith boys of being responsible, and the conclusion that was arrived at; namely, that the railroad would not come to Freeport, but would go to Vandalia.

"Well?" asked Mr. Dent, as Mr. Smith folded up the letter, and handed it back to him.

"Well," remarked Mr. Smith with a sigh. "It's too bad! But are you sure my boys are to blame? They never said anything to me about it."

"They hardly would, unless you asked them," replied the president of the Board of Trade. "Still, the letter must be true. I know the accident happened, for I

heard of it at the post office last night, though no one then knew who had caused it. The question is, what's to be done?"

"Of course," assented Mr. Smith. "What's to be done?"

"We want that railroad to come here," proceeded Mr. Dent. "But it looks now as if it would not. Your boys are responsible. They ought to be punished."

"And if they did what this letter says they did, they shall be," declared their father. "But that won't get us the railroad. I am as anxious for it to come here, as is any other citizen. It would help to make up for the loss of my three thousand dollars. Why don't you call a meeting, and see what can be done?"

"That's what I'm going to do. But I thought I'd tell you about your boys, first."

"I am glad you did. I shall speak to them about it—Ah, here they come now. If you will wait here a few minutes, Mr. Dent, I'll find out all about it."

The three brothers entered their father's store, but, seeing him talking with Mr. Dent, they started to go out.

"Come here, boys," called Mr. Smith.

"Trouble's coming," remarked William, in a low voice. "I can tell by the way he speaks."

"What about this?" asked Mr. Smith, handing John the latter.

As soon as John had read a little way he knew what it was. But he finished the missive.

"Well?" asked his father.

"We—we started the hand car," he admitted. "We just wanted a little ride. We didn't know it would go

out on the main line, and down the grade. We couldn't stop it. We didn't know it did all that damage."

"No, and I don't suppose you knew that it would be the means of keeping the railroad away from Freeport; did you?" asked Mr. Dent.

"No," replied John.

"It was an accident," put in Pete.

"We didn't mean to," added William.

"That's what you always say," exclaimed his father.

"Oh, boys! why do you do these things?"

"We didn't mean any harm," went on Pete, for he and his brothers were somewhat alarmed by their father's manner.

"No, that's the same story you always tell. The trouble is you don't think! You don't look ahead!"

"Even if we had," said William innocently, "we couldn't have seen the water tank."

"That's not it," went on Mr. Smith. "I mean that you don't consider what will be the result of your pranks. Now this is a very serious matter."

"I should say it was!" chimed in Mr. Dent indignantly. "It means the ruin of our town if the railroad goes to Vandalia."

"Can't you get 'em to come here?" asked John. "We'll never do such a thing again. You see it happened before we knew it. The hand car got going and we couldn't stop it."

"Mr. Stanton won't accept that excuse," said Mr. Dent. "I don't believe we can make him change his mind, though I'll call a meeting of the Board of Trade, and we'll make them an offer of free land for their

depot and a freight station, if I can get the members to agree to it. I must be going now."

"I am sorry to have to admit that my boys are to blame for this trouble," said Mr. Smith. "I shall punish them, and you can depend upon me to do my share in trying to get the railroad here."

"Very well," replied Mr. Dent, a bit stiffly, as he went out.

For some minutes Mr. Smith said nothing to his three sons. He knew they were not bad boys, being merely thoughtless, and he was considering how he could best punish them for what they had done. He was so worried over the loss of his money, and other business troubles that he hardly knew what to do. As for the three brothers, they were very uneasy. They had no idea that their prank would result so seriously.

"Boys," said Mr. Smith at length, "I don't know what to say to you. This is the worst trouble you have ever been in, and I am very sorry to hear of it."

"We didn't mean——" began William, but his father stopped him with a gesture.

"There is no use saying that again," he remarked. "I think you had better go home, and remain in the house the rest of the day. That will keep you out of mischief, at any rate. By that time I may have thought of some means for punishing you, that will impress upon you that you must be more careful in the future. You are too big to whip. I must try other means. Now you may go."

"I wish we'd let that old hand car alone," said Pete, when he and his brothers were outside.

"Too late to wish that now," spoke William. "I wonder what he'll do to us?"

"Hard to say," added John. "We deserve all we'll get, however. I wish I'd seen that smash, though."

"So do I," added his brothers, and William remarked: "It must have been a peach!"

Mr. Dent called a meeting of the Board of Trade for that night. He explained the object of it, and read the letter from the surveyor. Several citizens and merchants had heard about it before, but this did not lessen their anger.

"Those Smith boys ought to be driven out of town!" exclaimed Mr. Wright, who kept a feed store.

"Yes, that's right," declared Mr. Henderson, who was the proprietor of a shoe store. "They've practically ruined the place."

"They're always up to some mischief," added Mr. Blanchard, owner of a grocery.

"Well, of course they've gotten into quite some trouble this time," admitted Mr. Flint, who was a retired merchant, "but I guess they're no worse than the general run of boys. Maybe things aren't so bad as they seem."

"They're bad enough," declared Chairman Dent. "If the railroad doesn't come here, we might as well go out of business."

"Or move to Vandalia," suggested some one in the rear of the meeting hall.

"That's right," added several.

"Those Smith boys ought to have coats of tar and feathers!" shouted a hot-headed man. "I'll form one

of a committee to put 'em on, too," he continued excitedly.

"I'll help," put in another.

"Now, now, gentlemen," said Mr. Flint calmly. "This sort of talk isn't going to help matters any. We should go at this in a business sort of way. The boys certainly did a lot of mischief, but I don't suppose they meant to."

"That's what they said," murmured Mr. Dent.

"Therefore I propose," went on Mr. Flint, "that we form a committee, to wait on Mr. Stanton, the engineer in charge of the work, and see if we can get him to change his mind. We might be able to offer more inducements than Vandalia can."

"That's the way to talk," came from several cooler headed ones.

"Tar and feathers would teach the boys a lesson," insisted the man who had first proposed this. "Let's do that, and then form the committee later."

"Good idea," chimed in his supporters.

There were cries of "Yes," mingling with those of "no," and Mr. Dent vainly banged his gavel in an effort to bring about order.

"I move that the committee be named to see Mr. Stanton to-morrow," shouted Mr. Flint.

Some one seconded it, and Mr. Dent tried to put the question.

"Those Smith boys ought to be punished," called a man near the rear door.

"I think they will be," said Mr. Dent, who was afraid

that something rash might be done. "Their father promised me he would attend to them."

"He ought to attend to them with a birch switch," murmured the man who was in favor of tar and feathers. "If I find my boys playing with those Smith lads I'll put a stop to it."

"So will I," added one or two.

"Now the question is about this committee," called Mr. Dent, and having at last succeeded in getting quiet, he put the motion, which was carried unanimously. One or two, however, wanted to pass another motion, calling for censure of the boys, but it was decided that this would hardly be a dignified proceeding for the Board of Trade, and it was felt that Mr. Smith could best attend to his sons.

"And now we'll do our best to get the railroad here," said Mr. Flint, as the meeting adjourned.

"Say," remarked Spider Langdon, who, with Beantoe Pudder, and some other lads, had attended the meeting, keeping out of sight, however, in the gallery, "I know what we'll do."

"What?" asked Beantoe.

"We'll scare the life out of the Smith boys."

"How?"

"Tell 'em the Board of Trade has decided to tar and feather 'em, and ride 'em out of town on a rail!"

"They won't believe you if you tell 'em."

"Maybe not," admitted Spider, with a cunning leer. "But I know how to make 'em."

"How?"

"I'll tell Doc Lutken, and he'll take word to 'em. Doc's a chum of theirs."

"Good idea," agreed Beantoe. "Doc wasn't at the meeting. Let's find him. He's probably down around the post office. Gee! maybe those Smith boys won't be scared!"

The two plotters found Doc a little later. Neither he nor any of his chums had attended the session.

"Say, Doc," began Spider, "they had a great meeting to-night."

"Who did?"

"The Board of Trade. Regular indignation meeting. It ain't over yet, but they're going to fix the Smith boys all right."

"What they going to do?" asked the physician's son, interested at once in anything that concerned his chums.

"They're going to tar and feather 'em. Beantoe and I just heard 'em say so; didn't we, Beantoe?"

"Sure," replied his crony.

Doc started off down the street.

"Where you going?" asked Spider.

"I'm going to tell John and his brothers," called back the lad. "That'll give 'em a chance to get away. No Board of Trade is going to tar and feather any of my chums if I can help it!"

CHAPTER XI

THE BOYS RUN AWAY

"Say," remarked Beantoe, as he and Spider watched Doc hurrying up the street, "do you s'pose he'll tell 'em?"

"Sure."

"And what'll they do?"

"Skip out, maybe. Anyway, they'll be good and scared, and it'll make up for them throwin' us in the brook."

"That's right. Say, I wish we could see 'em run."

"We can."

"How?"

"Go and hang around their house. I'll bet they'll go all right."

"That's what we'll do then. Come on Spider."

Beantoe started off, but stumbled over an uneven place in the sidewalk, and would have fallen, had not Spider caught him.

"There you go again!" exclaimed the long legged youth. "What makes you stumble so?"

"I can't help it," whined Beantoe. "I s'pose it's because I'm excited."

"Well, then, don't get excited. Come on, now. And when you get near the Smith house, you don't want to make a lot of racket."

Meanwhile Doc Lutken was hurrying on. He reached the home of the Smith boys, and saw that a light was burning in the second story, where the brothers had their rooms. There was no illumination below.

"Mr. Smith must be out, or else he's gone to bed," Doc reasoned. "I hope I'm in time to give them a good start. The idea of tarring and feathering 'em, just for letting the hand car get away. It's a shame!"

He cautiously approached the house. Then he gave a whistle like a tree toad. This he repeated thrice.

A window went up, and John Smith stuck his head out. He too whistled like a tree toad, and getting an answer, asked:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Cap—Doc," was the reply. "Say, come on down."

"What for?"

"Because. I've got something important to tell you."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Dad said we weren't to go out of the house until he decided what to do with us. You know—on account of that hand car."

"That's what I've come about. Where's your father?"

"Down to the store."

"Then you'd better skip out, for a while, anyhow," went on Doc. "They'll be here any minute."

"Who?"

"The committee."

"What committee?"

"The one from the Board of Trade. They're going to tar and feather you for being to blame about the railroad not coming here. Come down, and I'll tell you."

John turned from the window, and quickly imparted to his brothers what Doc had said. Then the three boys came down to hear further particulars from Harry Lutken, who had so promptly speeded off to warn them, as he supposed, from a shameful fate.

"Are you joking?" asked William, as Harry began his story.

"Not a bit of it. Those men were fearful mad at you."

"And are they coming here?" asked Pete.

"That's what, Sawed-off. Spider Langdon slipped out to tell me."

"It's queer Spider would take that trouble on our account, Doc," observed John suspiciously.

"Oh, I guess he didn't tell me out of any regard for you. He couldn't keep the news to himself."

"What had we better do?" asked Pete, in some alarm.

"Skip out," advised Harry. "Stay away for a few days, until it all blows over."

"I guess we'd better," said William.

"Hark!" exclaimed Doc suddenly.

The sound of men's voices could be heard, and the tramp of several feet echoed on the sidewalk.

"Here's where they live," the boys, in the shadow of the porch, heard some one say.

"There they are," whispered Doc. "You're too late!"

"No," we can slip out the back way," said William.

"Only I want to get some money and grub."

"Is this the house?" asked another of the men.

"Yes, right here."

Though the boys did not know it, the speakers were only some of the cooler headed members of the Board of Trade returning from the meeting, and, in discussing what had taken place, they happened to speak casually of the Smith boys, as they got in front of their house. But of course the lads thought the voices could be only those of the tar and feathering committee, coming to wreak vengeance upon them.

"Don't lose any time," advised Doc. "Where will you go?"

"We'll hide in the woods back of the railroad camp," decided John in a whisper. "Sneak out and tell us how things are going, if you get a chance."

"I will. Don't say I warned you. Dad belongs to the Board of Trade, though he wasn't there to-night. I'll sneak off now. Those men must be planning to rush in. They aren't saying anything."

Good reason, for the men had passed on, all unconscious of what import their words had conveyed to the lads.

Doc hurried off into the darkness, and the three boys, having cautiously made their way into the house, stood for a moment to consider their plans.

"I've got about a dollar," whispered William.

"I'm dead broke," said Pete, which was his usual condition.

"I've got about three bones," added John. "That will last a little while. Lucky it's warm. We can sleep in the woods. It won't be the first time we've been camping."

"Hurry up," advised William. "Let's get some grub from the pantry and skip out. It's a good thing Doc told us."

"It sure is," agreed his brothers.

Moving cautiously about, so as not to awaken the housekeeper, the lads went to the pantry and got what victuals they could find by the light of several matches. Then, expecting every moment to hear a thundering summons on the front door, and a demand that they surrender, and submit to the ordeal of the tar and feathers, they crept down the back stairs, and stood for a moment on the rear stoop.

"What'll dad say?" inquired John, a trifle sadly.

"I guess he'll understand," answered Pete. "Come on."

They descended the steps, crossed the yard, crouching down to get below the shadow of the fence, so that no spying eyes might see them, and were soon in the open fields. Pete stepped into a hole and pitched forward, dropping his bundle of food.

"Easy!" cautioned John, in a hoarse whisper. "Do you want them to hear us?"

"I couldn't help it," said his brother. "Say, it's getting cooler, and I believe it's going to rain. It'll be no fun sleeping in the woods in the wet."

"It's better than being tarred and feathered," replied

William grimly. "Come on. I think I hear them after us."

The excited imaginations of the boys might have made them hear almost anything, and so they hurried on, running away from home for the first time in their lives.

"And to think of our nice, comfortable beds," remarked Pete, as he paused to look back at the house, the distant light of which could be seen. "Good warm beds there, and we've got to sleep in the wet woods."

"Cut it out!" advised John sharply. "We aren't doing this for fun."

"I should say not!" exclaimed William very positively. "I wish I'd never seen a hand car!"

Spider and Beantoe, hiding in the bushes near the Smith house, saw the three brothers depart.

"The trick worked," said Spider. "They're leaving!"

"They sure are," admitted Beantoe. "When they find out no one is after them won't they feel cheap!"

"Let's scare 'em some more," suggested Spider.

"How?"

"I'll show you."

Raising his head, he cried out in a high, shrill, unnatural voice:

"There they go! There they are! Right in that field!"

The Smith boys heard and shivered.

"They're coming!" exclaimed Pete. "Let's run!"

And run they did, through the darkness, toward the friendly cover of the woods.

"It's raining!" suddenly exclaimed William.

"Come on," called Pete, who was in the lead.

Chuckling to themselves at the success of their joke, Spider and Beantoe crawled from their hiding place, and started back toward the village, while the Smith boys kept on through the rain and darkness.

CHAPTER XII

AN UNSUCCESSFUL SEARCH

Remaining quite late at his store that night, going over some accounts, and trying to see a way out of the trouble caused by the robbery, Mr. Smith did not get home until after one o'clock in the morning. He was much worried over financial matters, and had given up all hope of ever seeing his money again. That meant that he would have to make important changes in his affairs.

"I'm afraid I shan't sleep much to-night," he thought as he let himself into the house with his latch key. "I never had so much to worry about business as I have now, and then there is the conduct of my boys. They are good lads, but they are too thoughtless. I wish their mother had lived. Maybe it would have made a difference. Still, perhaps they will outgrow their mischievous tricks."

He entered the house quietly, so as not to awaken the housekeeper or the boys, whom he supposed sleeping in their rooms. In his apartment Mr. Smith sat down on a chair, and began going over again, in his mind, the various points of his business.

"I must try and forget it for a while," he said with a sigh. "Otherwise I shall never get to sleep. I won-

der what they did at the Board of Trade meeting? I wish I had had a chance to go. I hope they didn't blame my boys too much. I wonder what I shall do to punish them? It's quite a problem."

And, puzzling over this, and many other troublesome matters, Mr. Smith fell into an uneasy slumber.

"Aren't the boys up yet, Mrs. Murdock?" Mr. Smith asked the housekeeper, as he came down to breakfast, rather later than usual the next morning.

"No, sir, and I haven't heard them about. They seldom sleep as late as this."

"That's queer," murmured Mr. Smith. Going to the foot of the stairs he called:

"John! William! Peter! Come, it's breakfast time."

There was no answer.

"I wonder if they can be sulking," he said, "because I made them stay in? They never did that before, for they're manly lads. Guess I'll go and have a talk with them."

He was much surprised when, looking in one room after another, he saw no signs of his sons, and noticed that their beds had not been slept in.

"Mrs. Murdock!" he called. "Did you see the boys go out?"

"Go out? No, sir. When?"

"At any time since yesterday afternoon."

"No. Aren't they up stairs?"

"No, and their beds aren't disturbed."

The housekeeper, alarmed by the tone of Mr. Smith's voice, hurried up stairs.

“That’s very strange,” she remarked, when she saw the empty rooms. “They must have run away.”

“Run away? Why should they?”

“Well, on account of worrying over that hand car accident,” answered Mrs. Murdock, for she had heard about that affair.

“Nonsense,” said Mr. Smith. “They would have no occasion to run away for that. Nor need they have feared any punishment I would have inflicted. Still, it does look as if they had left on that account. When did you last see them?”

“Right after supper. They went to their rooms, and when I got through with my work I went to bed. I heard the boys moving around, and then I fell asleep.”

“Strange,” murmured Mr. Smith. “I can’t understand it. I must ask some of their chums if they have seen them. Who are the boys they go with mostly?”

“Well, there’s Dr. Lutken’s boy, and the widow Jones’s son, and a boy they call Norton.”

“Yes, I know him. Norton Tonkin. Mr. Tonkin’s house is on my way to the village. I’ll stop and ask him.”

Mr. Smith made a hurried breakfast, and started out. His inquiries of Norton Tonkin resulted in nothing, as that lad had not seen his chums in several days.

“Maybe Bateye knows where they went,” he said.

“Bateye?” repeated Mr. Smith, in some surprise.

“Yes, Bateye Jones.”

“Oh, you mean the widow Jones’s son.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll ask him,” went on Mr. Smith, but the lad who

was credited with being able to see in the dark, knew nothing of John and his brothers.

"Doc Lutken might know," he volunteered.

"I don't believe the doctor will——" began Mr. Smith.

"I mean his boy—young Doc, we call him."

"Oh," said Mr. Smith. "Yes, I shall ask him."

But Doc had gone fishing, and did not get back until late that afternoon. Meanwhile Mr. Smith had made inquiries in many directions, but all to no avail. It began to be rumored about town that the Smith boys had run away, and there were several persons who hoped they never would come back, though, to be fair to our heroes, they were no worse than half the other lads in town.

But, once Mr. Smith met Harry Lutken, he knew he was on the right track.

"Do you know why my boys went away?" he asked Doc.

"Yep."

"Why?"

"I don't wanter tell."

"Why not?"

"Well, they might get caught. I told 'em to skip out, and I don't want to be blamed."

"But why did you tell them to leave home at night?"

"So they wouldn't be tarred and feathered."

"Tarred and feathered?" Mr. Smith was greatly surprised. He questioned Harry, and, gradually, the lad told of Spider's warning. Mr. Smith, who had

heard of what took place at the meeting of the Board of Trade, including the hot-headed suggestions of the vindictive man, understood what had happened, and knew why his sons had run away.

"Why do you suppose Spider, as you call him, told you such things?" he asked Doc, who was surprised to learn there was no real basis for the threat the long legged youth had told of.

"He must have a grudge against us fellows. But wait until I catch him. I'll punch his nose for him, good and proper."

"And where were you to meet my boys?" went on Mr. Smith.

"In the woods, near the railroad camp. There's a cave there, where we sometimes stay."

"Would you mind taking me there?"

"Sure not. Only it'll be dark when we get there."

"That doesn't matter. I must find my boys. They may be hungry, or something may have happened to them."

"They were going to take some grub along, so I guess they won't be hungry," volunteered Harry. "Wait until I put my fishpole away, and I'll go with you. We'll stop and get Bateye, too. He can see in the dark."

"Very well," assented Mr. Smith, and soon the three were on their way to the woods.

"Maybe we'd better stop and make some inquiries of the railroad men," suggested Mr. Smith.

"I don't believe they'd like it," said Harry.

"Why not?"

"Well, you know the hand car——"

"Oh, that won't matter. Besides, I wish to apologize to Mr. Stanton, for any trouble my boys may have caused him, however unintentional it was."

The two lads were a little doubtful of this procedure, but they need not have been alarmed. Mr. Stanton, and several of his men had left the camp, to attend to another part of the construction work, and Mr. Carboy, who gave Mr. Smith this information, made no unpleasant references to our heroes' prank.

"No, we haven't seen them around here," he said. "I know the boys. They don't bother me any. Boys will be boys. By the way, did you ever hear anything more of that robber?"

"No, nor the money either."

"Too bad. Well, Mr. Smith, if I see anything of your lads I'll tell them you were looking for them, and that they can come home, with nothing to fear."

"I wish you would."

It was getting dark when the searchers left the railroad camp, and gangs of Italian laborers were gathering about camp fires, where they were smoking their after-supper pipes, and discussing matters in their rapid jargon.

"How do you get to that cave?" asked Mr. Smith, as he and the boys started into the woods.

"I'll show you," volunteered Bateye. "It's not far."

Once in the forest the seekers called the names of the three missing lads. But the echoes were their only replies.

"Here's the cave," suddenly exclaimed Bateye.

"Is there any one in it?" asked Mr. Smith eagerly.

"Doesn't seem to be," replied the lad with the sharp sight, as he peered about in the black interior.

"John! William! Are you here?" called their father.

His voice reverberated through the cavern.

Harry Lutken struck a match. As it flared up the three looked eagerly about them. They saw only the black, rocky walls of the cave.

Suddenly Bateye uttered a cry, and sprang forward.

"Here's John's knife!" he said. "I know it, 'cause it's got a piece broken from the handle!"

"That's right," agreed his chum.

"Then the boys have been here," said Mr. Smith.

"That's what," said Windsor Jones. "I thought they'd come here. But they're not here now."

Mr. Smith looked about the cave, as the match died out. Then he, too, uttered a cry, and picked up something from the floor of the cavern.

"Here is a note book, stolen from my desk when the three thousand dollars was taken!" he cried. "The robber must have been here, when my boys were. Maybe they had a fight, and he has injured them! Harry, will you run back to the railroad camp, and ask Mr. Carboy and some of his men to come here? Ask him to fetch some torches. Maybe we can get on the track of the thief!"

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE CAVE

"Say, this is fierce!" exclaimed William, as he and his two brothers plodded on, stumbling in the darkness. "It's going to be a peach of a night to stay out in the woods."

"Well, we can't help it," observed John. "Turn up your coat collar."

"Humph! That won't stop it raining. I'm soaked through now."

"So'm I," added Pete. "And these sandwiches are running all over. The bread's all off the meat. Why didn't you cut the bread thicker, John, while you were at it?"

"Because I didn't have time. Save the meat, anyhow. We have given those tar and feather fellows the slip, however. I'll bet they're hopping mad because we got away."

"Do you s'pose they would really have put tar and feathers on us?" asked William.

"You heard what Doc said," replied John. "They must have been pretty mad at us, and it wasn't our fault at all."

"Of course not," said Pete. "Say, but it certainly is raining!"

There was no doubt about it. The storm had quickly

developed and now, with a deluge of rain, and a cold wind it made matters anything but pleasant for the runaway lads. On they stumbled through the darkness, over the fields, finally getting on the road that led to the construction camp.

"We'd better not go too near," cautioned John. "If Stanton or any of his men see us, they might have us arrested."

"Hu! If anybody can see in this darkness they're pretty good at it," observed Pete. "Even Bateye Jones would have his troubles. But what are we going to do? We can't go on this way all night. I'm getting tired. Can't we slack up a bit? I don't believe they'll catch us now."

They had been going at a rapid pace, regardless of anything save to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their supposed pursuers.

"Yes, I guess we can take it easy," assented John. "Say fellows, what's the matter with spending the night in the cave?"

"Good idea!" commented William. "It'll be dry there, and we can eat something. I'm as hungry as a dog. We can build a fire, too, and get warm."

This prospect cheered them, and they felt better as they skirted along the edge of the railroad construction camp, and struck off into the woods, by a path which they well knew, and which they managed even to find, despite the storm and darkness. It led to the cave, a natural cavern which the boys, for a few miles around, used as a shelter in case of storms coming up when they were in the woods hunting.

William, who had gone on ahead, came to a sudden halt when a short distance from the cave.

"Hark!" he exclaimed in a whisper, that brought his brothers to an instant halt. "There's some one in the bushes there, fellows."

Above the noise made by the pattering rain drops, and the sighing of the wind in the trees, could be heard the swishing of underbrush. The boys felt their hearts beginning to beat more rapidly, and there were choking sensations in their throats.

"Strike a match!" exclaimed William, still in that nerve-thrilling whisper.

John tried to, but his fire sticks had become wet, and only a phosphorous glow resulted.

"I can't get a light," he called in a low voice.

"Wait a minute. I've got some in a box," said Pete. "Here, take this grub," and he passed to John a bundle of food.

In the glow of fire that came from Pete's efforts the three lads saw suddenly leaping out from the darkness of the bushes two balls of reddish-green.

"An animal!" exclaimed William. "Look out fellows!"

He sprang back, colliding with Pete, who was close beside him, and Pete, in turn, knocked over John, just as when one brick in a row starts to topple over, all the rest follow. Down the three went, into the dripping underbrush.

There was a movement on the part of the animal. It sprang toward the prostrate boys. William, who felt a hairy body brush across his face, uttered a scream.

A moment later there came a joyous bark, and something began licking the hands and faces of Pete and John in turn.

"Waggles! It's Waggles!" cried John, as he managed to get to his feet. "The old dog has found us."

"Or we've found him," said Pete. "He's been out here in these woods I guess, for a couple of days, hunting rabbits."

"Gee! But he certainly gave me a scare!" exclaimed William. "I thought it was a wolf."

"There ain't any wolves around here," said John, in contempt.

"You never can tell—in the dark," was William's opinion. "Here, Waggles, old boy; how are you?"

The dog frisked about his three owners bestowing affectionate thumps of his tail first on one and then on another.

"I'm glad we found him," observed John.

"Yes, it won't be so lonesome—now," added Pete. "He reminds me of home."

The mention of home seemed to strike a sad, responsive chord in the hearts of his brothers.

"I wonder how long we'll have to stay away?" asked William.

"Oh, until they get over being mad at us," replied John.

"S'posin' they don't?" asked William.

"Well then—but what's the use talking that way?" inquired John fretfully. "Say, if we're going to that cave we'd better get a move on! It's raining harder than ever."

"It isn't far now," remarked Pete. "Come on, Waggles."

They started forward again, and, in a little while came to the entrance of the cavern. In they went, their dog following them, for he had often been there before.

"Oh, but it feels good to get out of that rain," observed Pete. "Let's make a fire, now. I left some wood here the last time I came. It ought to be here yet."

"Strike a match 'till we see," suggested John, and when the little flame flickered up, they saw a pile of tree branches.

They soon had a little blaze kindled, and gathered about its grateful warmth, Waggles stretching out on the side, to dry his dripping, shaggy coat.

"Make a good fire," directed John, "and we'll have something to eat. If we'd only had time we could have brought along a lot of grub, and a coffee pot. Then we could have camped for fair. But now we'll have to do the best we can."

The fire was made larger, and the boys, taking off their wet coats, spread them out to dry. Then they opened the packages of food. It was but sorry stuff, for the rain had soaked it, but they were too hungry to be particular. The bread, soppy as it was, and the cold meat tasted to them better than the finest dinner they had ever had.

"Give Waggles some," suggested Pete. "He's hungry."

The dog was casting expectant eyes, first on one and then on the other of his three ~~de~~ ung masters.

"Give him some yourself, you've got more than we have," said William, and Pete tossed the animal a bit of meat, which vanished in an instant.

"Guess he didn't have any luck hunting," observed John. "Never mind, we'll get you something to-morrow, Waggles."

"Say, this isn't so bad," remarked Pete, a little later, as, having finished the last of his bread and meat, he held out his hands to the blaze. "I'm feeling pretty good, now."

Outside the cave, near the entrance to which they were, could be heard the patter of the rain, and the moaning of the wind in the forest.

"It might be worse," said John. "What worries me, though is what we're going to do to-morrow."

"Oh, we'll find something," ventured William. "It's warm weather, and the summer isn't half gone yet. We can tramp around, and, maybe, get work at something. We could earn enough to live on, anyhow."

"Sure," added Pete. "Farmers would hire us. Or we might get a job on the railroad."

"Not if they knew us, after what we did," said John.

"Oh, well, we could go down the line two or three miles. Our name is so common, that whoever hired us would never remember about the hand car."

"They might," was John's opinion. "But we'll talk about it in the morning. I'm getting sleepy."

"So am I," admitted Pete, and William's position, stretched out as he was on the clean sand of the cave, indicated that he, too, could slumber.

"Pile on some more wood, and we'll take a snooze,"

suggested John, and Pete did so. Waggles was already asleep, all his dog troubles forgotten for the time being.

How long William slept he could not tell, but he was suddenly awakened by a growl from Waggles. The boy sat up, and, glancing at the dog, saw him standing ready for a spring, his ears cocked forward, and a ridge of hair raised along his spine.

William stared toward the mouth of the cavern, but the fire had died down, and he could see nothing. The dog, however, had better eyesight, or his other senses told him something was there.

There was a slight movement, as if some one was entering the cave, and William felt an uneasy sense that some one was staring at him—some one with evil eyes. He reached over and nudged John with his foot.

At that instant a brand in the fire broke, sending up a shower of sparks, and a little blaze. In the light of it William looked toward the entrance to the cavern. He saw a man standing there—a man whose figure and face were vaguely familiar.

John sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“What’s the matter—what is it?” he asked.

Waggles leaped forward with a fierce growl. The blaze from the fire became brighter, and, in the light of it William saw the man raise his hand, to ward off the attack of the dog.

To the boy’s surprise and horror, he noted that the man’s hand was without a thumb! The dog was almost upon him, and William saw him turn, as if to run!

“The robber! The robber!” screamed the lad.

“John! Pete! Here’s the robber! The man without a thumb!”

John leaped to his feet, and started toward the mouth of the cave. William followed, and Pete, awakened by the cries, staggered to his feet. Off in the darkness could be heard the shouts of the boys, the growls of the dog, and another sound, as of some one running through the bushes.

“Catch him, Waggles! Grab him!” shouted William.

The dog answered with a bark, and a savage growl.

Then came an exclamation of pain.

“Waggles has him!” cried John.

The dog’s growling and barking changed to a yelp of surprise and agony. The animal came back toward the cave, half rolling, half sliding. The man had given him a powerful kick.

Over Waggles stumbled John and William, going down in a heap. Pete, rushing out of the cave, added to the confusion, piling on top of his brothers and the dog. When they managed to untangle themselves, and start forward, it was only to see a blank wall of darkness beyond the opening of the cavern.

“He’s got away,” said John.

“Let’s follow!” cried William.

“No use in this darkness,” went on John. “It’ll be morning, though, soon,” he added, as he looked at his watch by the distant gleam of the fire. “Then we’ll try to trace him. I wonder what the robber was doing here?”

CHAPTER XIV

MEETING THEOPHILUS CLATTER

Going back to the fire the boys replenished it, and, as the blaze sprang up, they looked curiously at one another.

"How did it all happen?" asked John. "Who saw him first?"

"I did," replied William. "Waggles woke me up, by growling, and when the fire got brighter, I saw him—thumbless hand and all."

"Are you sure he's the same man we met the day we were flying the kite," asked Pete.

"Sure," replied William.

"His thumb was certainly off, and it was his left hand," added John. "I saw it."

"Do you s'pose he came in here to find us?" questioned Pete.

"Of course not, Sawed-off," replied John. "How would he know we were here? Probably he was out in the woods, got wet through, and knew of this cave. But it's queer he should be hanging around here, after robbing our house."

"We don't know that he robbed our house," declared Pete.

"Of course he did," insisted John. "There's the mark of his hand, without a thumb, to prove it."

"Well, there may be more than one man without a thumb. Look at the express thief."

"Yes, I know, but this one got dad's three thousand dollars all right, and we're going to get it back."

"If we catch him," added William. "I don't believe we will."

"Waggles can trail him," declared John. "He bit him, and Waggles never forgets a person he bites."

"Let's see if he's hurt," suggested Pete.

"Who? Waggles or the robber?" asked William.

"Waggles, of course. How are you going to find the thief? Come here, Waggles!"

The animal crept whining to the feet of the boys. He seemed afraid, and held up on paw, pitifully.

"It's broken!" exclaimed John, as he tenderly felt of the dog's foot. "That fellow kicked him and broke it! Oh, wait until I get my hands on him!"

"Poor old Waggles," spoke William soothingly, as he carefully touched the wounded paw. Even the light caress of the boy made the dog wince.

"We'll bind it up in splints," said Pete. "That will make the bones grow together."

"Good idea," commented John. "Bring me some pieces of wood, and I'll whittle 'em out."

Then, sitting around the fire in the cave, the boys bandaged up the broken fore-foot of the dog, using splints, skillfully cut out by John, and sacrificing part of the lining of their coats for bandages. Waggles whined at times, and licked the hands of those who were ministering to him. It was painful, when John, as best he could, placed the broken bones in place to knit

together, and Waggles howled pitifully, but he did not run away.

Presently the rude surgery was completed, and the lads gazed, not without some pride, at their work.

"It's a good thing a dog can go on three legs," observed William. "Otherwise we might have to stay in the cave with him until he got well."

They never thought of deserting Waggles in his trouble.

"And it's a good thing it's a front paw, instead of a hind one," added Pete. "He can go better that way. I hope he bit a good, large chunk out of that scoundrel."

"More likely he only grabbed him by the clothes," observed John. "But we certainly must trail him as soon as it gets light. It's stopped raining, anyhow, that's one good thing."

"No use going to sleep again," was William's opinion. "Let's sit around until it's light enough to go out. Then we'll see what we can do toward breakfast."

"Breakfast," murmured Pete. "Don't mention it! A nice hot cup of coffee now, and some ham and eggs——"

"Hit him, Bill!" called John, to his brother. "He's got no right to mention such things now."

Their clothes were quite dry by this time, and they sat about the friendly fire, talking over what had just happened, and speculating as to the appearance of the man they felt sure was the robber. They could not understand why he should remain in the neighborhood of the scene of his crime.

"Well, there's no use talking any more about it," said John. "The thing to do is to get after him."

"Wouldn't it be a good thing to let the police know?" asked Pete. "They can catch him better than we can."

"And give ourselves away?" inquired John. "Probably if that Board of Trade gave up the idea of tarring and feathering us, the railroad people would have us arrested for smashing the water tank, and damaging Mr. Stanton's tent."

"Could they have us arrested for what we didn't mean to do?" William wanted to know.

"Sure," answered John. "No sir, we'll keep away from the police, and from Freeport, for a long time yet. When it's blown over, we'll come back. But come on, it's getting light now, and we can go out. Can you walk, Waggles?"

The dog replied with a whine, and hobbled along on three legs, following the lads from the cave. Nor did any of them notice that John's knife was left behind, where he had whittled out the splints for the dog's leg, and that, where Waggles had attacked the man without a thumb, there lay, on the sandy floor of the cave a little red note book.

"What shall we do first?" asked John, as they stood at the entrance of the cave, and looked out on the world, bathed in early morning sunlight, "look for traces of the robber, or hunt breakfast?"

"Breakfast!" exclaimed his brothers in a breath, while Pete added: "I don't believe we can get much trace of that fellow excepting by asking people, and we can do that just as well after breakfast as we can before."

But what worries me is where are we going to get a meal."

It was the first time that this problem had come seriously home to the lads, and it rather puzzled them. It had seemed much easier to consider it in the cave, by the warm fire, than it was in the glaring light of day.

"Maybe we could get grub at the railroad camp," said William. "The men would give us some if we asked 'em. The Italians in camp there get their own meals."

"Yes, we'd look nice, going up there, and asking for a handout," said John. "First we'd know they'd turn us over to a constable."

"Then what are we going to do?" asked Williat.

"We'll go along until we strike a house," decided John. "We've got a little money, and we can offer to pay for breakfast. We're not tramps—not just yet."

"But maybe there's an alarm out for us," objected Pete. "It's likely that the Board of Trade knows we've skipped out, by this time, and has sent word all around for us to be arrested on sight. No farmhouse for mine."

"That's right," agreed William.

John looked dubious.

"What'll we do then?" he asked.

"Go along until we get farther away from Freeport," suggested Pete. "Maybe no one will know about us then, and we can buy a meal."

"But—I'm getting hungry," said John.

"Hu! You ain't the only one," observed William. "I've got a hole here big enough to put a peck measure in," and he held his hand over his stomach.

They tramped moodily through the woods, until they came to a country road. It led to Hillsboro, a town about ten miles from Freeport.

"Might as well take this," said John. "Come on, Waggles."

The dog limped on, with a whine. Probably he, too, was wondering where his breakfast was coming from. The dog stopped to drink from a little brook.

"Guess that'll have to do for ours, at least for a while," remarked John. "When we strike a grocery I'm going to buy some crackers, and cheese and herring."

"Think it'll be safe?" asked Pete.

"I don't care if it is or not! I'm not going to starve!"

As they turned around a bend in the road, they saw, drawn up along one side of the highway, a gaily painted wagon. To the rear was fastened a sleek horse, which was cropping the grass.

"Gypsies!" exclaimed William. "They wouldn't know us. Maybe we could buy some grub from them."

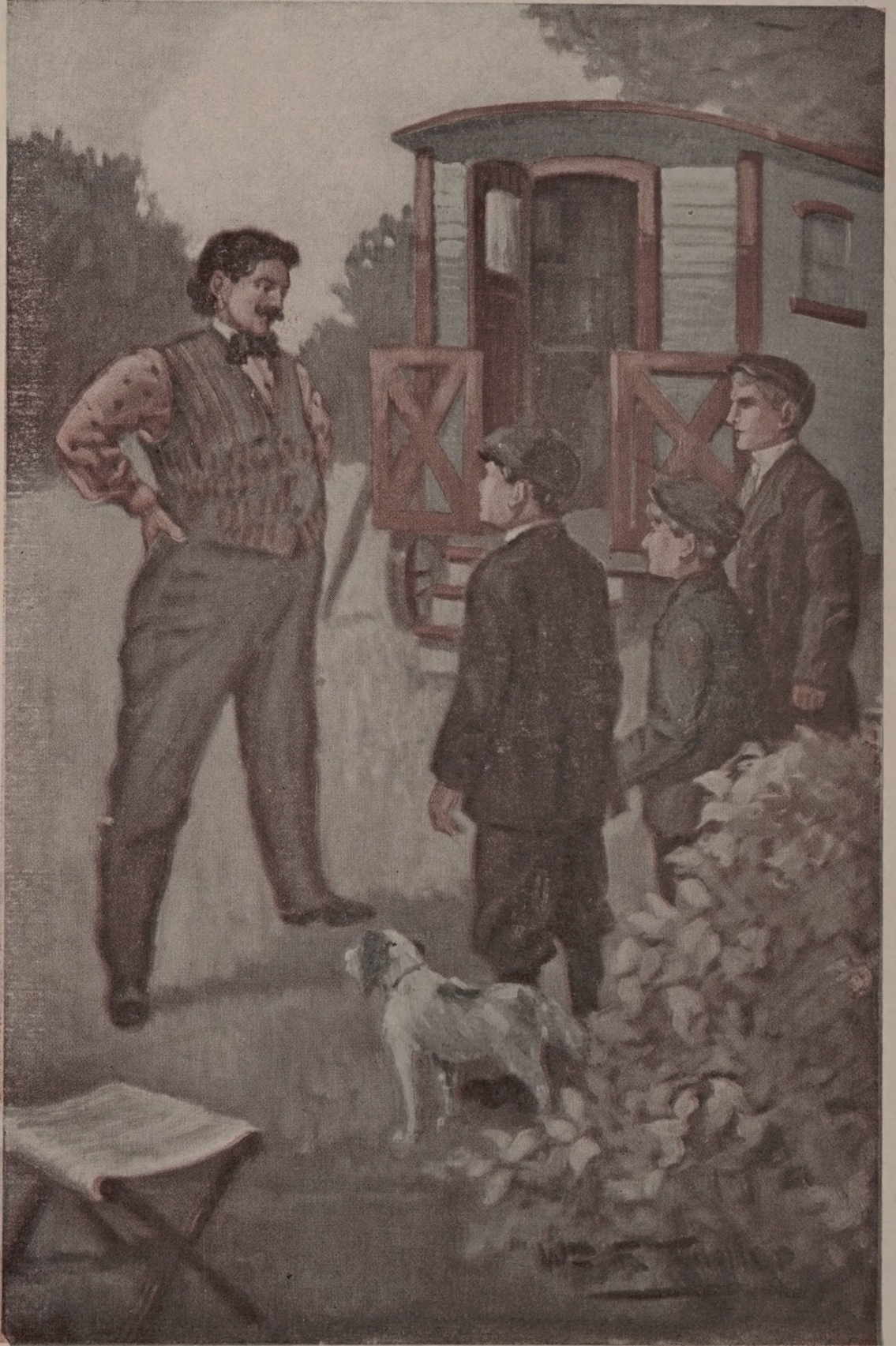
They advanced toward the gaudily decorated vehicle. The horse ceased eating, looked at them, and whinnied. A man came to the back door of the wagon, which was evidently used as a sort of traveling house. He descended the small flight of steps.

He was a man with long, flowing black locks, through which could be seen the gleam of gold rings in his ears. He wore light trousers, a red and green striped vest, and, being without a coat, it could be seen that his shirt was red, with black polkadots splattered over it. His big, black, curly moustache matched his hair.

"Ah, good morning, my three soldiers of fortune!" he exclaimed in a loud voice, that, somehow, was quite persuasive. "Out to breathe the pure ozone of the early morning hours. Nothing like it, save my wonderful Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, which is good for both man and beast, and eradicates all the ills that flesh is heir to, and some that it is not. Perchance you are seeking to be relieved of some noisome disease, or, perchance you are troubled in your mind, about fortune, friends, love, home or business worries. One glance at your hands will demonstrate how long you must suffer ere you will be rewarded with happiness. Or, belike, you have upon your clothing some spots which you have sought in vain to get rid of. If so, let me earnestly recommend a cake of my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent, which will take out stains on linen, silk, wool, cotton, velvet, calico, satin, the skin of the hands or face, wall paper, newspaper, writing paper or wrapping paper. Positively nothing like it known. Ha! I see you are surprised, but, let me tell you that many are, who list to the patter of Theophilus Clatter. That's me. At your service!"

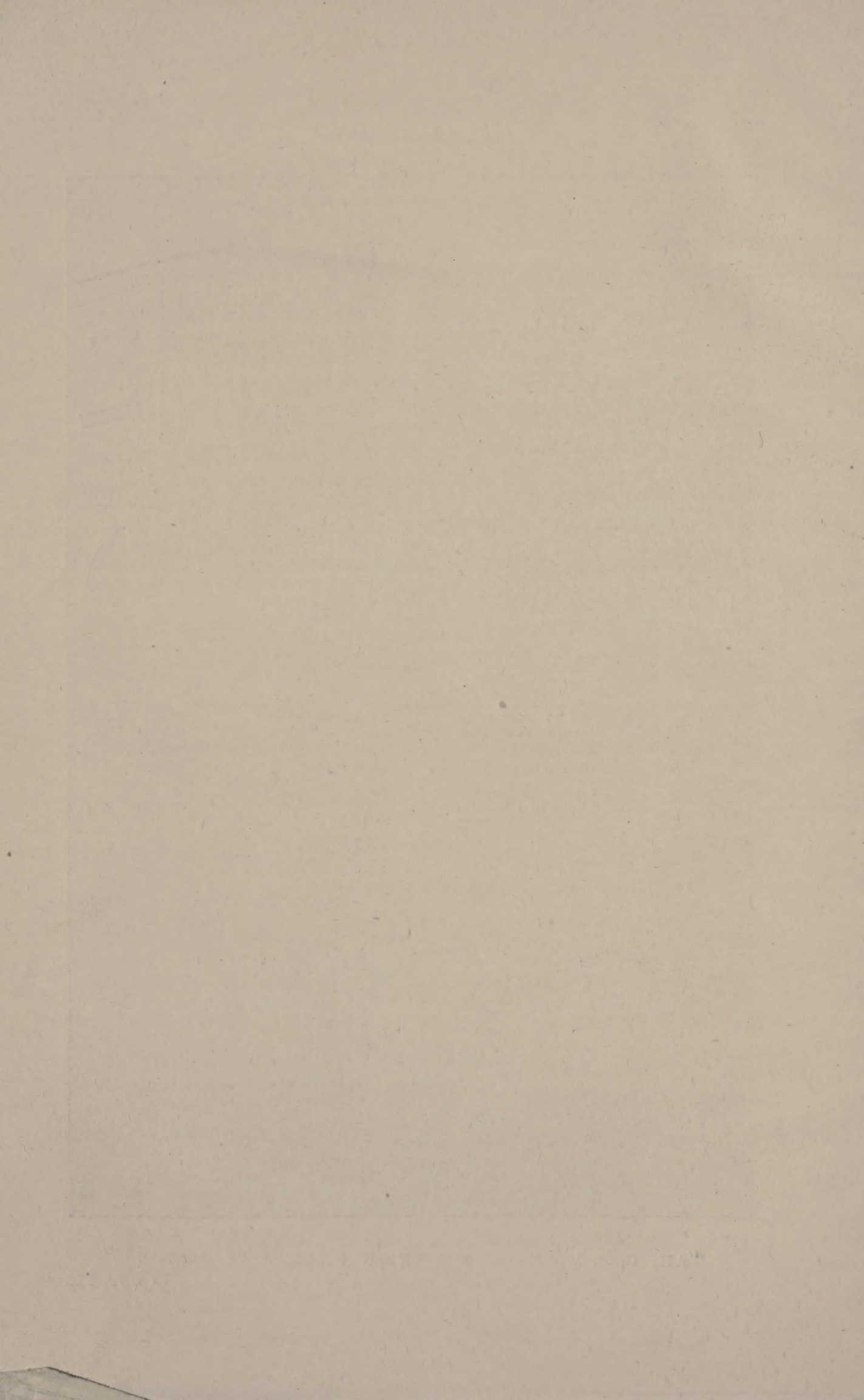
With a wave of his fat hand, on which sparkled a ring, the man, who in gaudiness almost matched his wagon, descended two more steps, and advanced toward the boys, smiling in a friendly fashion.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked. "Command me. I, too, am a soldier of fortune, not such very good fortune, just at present, but I may win a battle, or at least a skirmish, at any moment. Name your pleasure, young gentlemen, mayhap Theophilus Clatter can serve



"AH, GOOD-MORNING, MY THREE SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE!"

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you, be it that you suffer from ills of the body or troubles of the mind."

"We're hungry!" exclaimed William. "Can you sell us some breakfast?"

"Breakfast! Magic word!" exclaimed Mr. Clatter. "How it robs the day of its terrors! Breakfast! There's nothing like it, save, perchance dinner or supper. Breakfast! Come, you shall break your fast with me. What ho! Mercurio! Base slave! Varlet! Thrice cursed dog! We would breakfast!"

He clapped his hands three times, darted toward the wagon, and, in a trice had lifted out a small oil stove, a box containing a coffee pot and some other utensils, and a second box which held a miscellaneous collection of dishes and food.

"Breakfast!" he cried gaily. "We shall breakfast as do few kings or emperors! What ho! Mercurio! Light the magic fire!"

He set the oil wicks ablaze.

"Are you Mercurio?" asked John.

"At your service, gentlemen," replied Mr. Clatter, bowing low. "Now, if you will help to set the table, we will replenish the inner man, and complete the work started by tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep," and he dragged out from the wagon a large box.

"The table, to which I referred, gentlemen," he said with a smile. "The dishes you will find in this other receptacle. Now to put the coffee on, slice the bacon and fry the eggs. Ah, Mercurio, you are a jewel of a servant," and he tried to pat himself on the back, a feat by no means easy, considering his stout build.

Not a little astonished at the manners of their queer host, the boys set to work, to place the dishes on the improvised table. Mr. Clatter bustled about, making coffee, slicing the bacon and breaking eggs into a pan. Soon the appetizing odors were wafted about the gaily painted wagon, making the mouths of the hungry boys fairly water.

"Done to a turn," announced the odd traveler, as he inspected the bacon and eggs. "Gentlemen, be seated," and he waved his hand toward the table, about which, however, were no chairs.

"The ground for ours," said William with a laugh, joining in with the humorous spirit of their host, and soon the four were partaking of an excellent meal, while Waggles, with one ear cocked up, to indicate his surprise at what was taking place, caught occasional bits of bacon and bread that his young masters tossed to him.

CHAPTER XV

A PATENT MEDICINE SHOW

Much excited by what had been found in the cave, Harry Lutken hurried to the railroad camp. There he found Mr. Carboy, and gave him Mr. Smith's message.

"Those Smith boys lost, eh?" remarked the railroad foreman. "I always knew something would happen to those lads. They're too full of life. Well, they can't help it I s'pose. I don't bear them any ill will, though they certainly did make a rumpus here. Of course I'll help Mr. Smith hunt for them. And you say he has trace of the thief?"

"He found a note book that was taken when the money was stolen," replied Harry.

"I hope we catch the scoundrel. I'd rather find him than the boys, for I know they can look out for themselves."

Mr. Carboy called some of his men, and, with some oil torches, which were used about the camp, they set off with Harry for the cave. They found Mr. Smith and Bateye, pacing about in the darkness, waiting impatiently for them.

"Anything happened since I left?" asked Harry.

"Not a thing, Doc," replied his chum.

"We'd better scatter, as we can search better that

way," suggested Mr. Carboy, and he deployed his men through the woods.

They searched about for an hour or more, calling the names of the missing lads, but getting no answer. At last even Mr. Smith was convinced that his sons were not in the vicinity, or, if they were, they were too alarmed to make reply.

"I guess we'll have to give up," he said.

"Don't worry," advised the railroad foreman. "Those boys will come back, when they find out it's all a mistake. But I would like to catch that thief."

"So would I," said Mr. Smith, "but I'm afraid we won't have any such luck. I shall tell the police what I found, and they may be able to get some trace of him."

He and the two lads went back to Freeport, and Marshall Denby was much excited over the report they brought back.

"That's quite a clue," he said, "that note book. I believe we shall be able to arrest that robber, now."

"Well, he must be in this vicinity," argued Mr. Smith. "But I would rather my boys would come back than that you should arrest the thief, though, of course I'd like my money."

"I'll get both," promised the marshall, who had great faith in his abilities, and those of his constables.

But the Smith boys did not come back, for many days, neither was the mysterious thumbless man arrested, nor was Mr. Smith's three thousand dollars recovered—at least not for a long time, which happening you shall hear about in due course.

Meanwhile the Board of Trade committee, appointed to try to induce the railroad to come to Freeport, went to see Mr. Stanton, but, as he had left for another part of the line, they had to wait for some time before they could see him. Mr. Smith grew more and more worried as several days passed, and there were no tidings of his sons, who, meanwhile, were having a series of strange adventures, which shall be set down in due order.

"Are you traveling about for fun, or are you in some business?" asked John, of Mr. Clatter, when, in a measure, the sharp edge of their appetites had been dulled.

"For both," replied the flashy man promptly. "I find pleasure in doing business, as you shall see. Professor Clatter's patter amuses the multitudes, and, at the same time it enables me to dispose of my patent medicines, my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent, my Spotless Saponifier. Or, should any one desire to know the future, or have me relate to them what took place in the past, I have but to glance at their hands, and tell them. To my other abilities, I add those of a palmist, and I have no small talents in that direction."

"Do you travel all about?" asked William.

"All about, my young friend. North, south, east and west, there is no place that I love best. I am a citizen of the world. No certain place claims me, though many desire me. Now, since you have finished breakfast, permit me to ask whither you are journeying?"

The boys hesitated. They felt drawn to this jolly indi-

vidual, in spite of his claptrap ways. He seemed honest, and he certainly had given what they stood much in need of—a breakfast. Still, should they tell him their story? The same hesitation was in the mind of all three.

“How much do we owe you for the meal?” asked John, putting his hand in his pocket, where he had a few dollars. “We can pay for it.”

“Never!” exclaimed Professor Clatter. “What! Shall Mercurio and I take pay from soldiers of fortune like ourselves? Never! Never! Never! We would scorn to do it! Gentlemen, you are welcome to what you have received. I wish it had been a banquet of nectar and ambrosia, but bacon and eggs are not a bad substitute at times. You are thrice welcome to it, seeing that there are three of you. But as for pay—never! What ho! Mercurio! Base born slave! Away with these breakfast things. We must be up and doing! We must be on our way! Hillsboro calls us. Hillsboro is anxiously waiting the advent of Professor Clatter’s patter—his Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative—his Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent—his Spotless Saponifier—Hillsboro calls us—calls Pactolus and me—eh, Pactolus?”

The horse whinnied.

“Is that his name?” asked Pete.

“It is, my dear young friend,” replied Professor Clatter as he rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to clean the breakfast dishes of the remnants of food, which he scraped down in front of Waggles. “Pactolus, you

know, was the river in which King Midas washed, and, ever after, all that he touched turned to gold."

He paused to look at Waggles eagerly devouring the scraps of food. The dog seemed to have taken a liking to the patent medicine and soap vender.

"Yes, I named my horse Pactolus in the hope that, some day, he might lead me to a river which, bathing in, I might transmute into gold, such baser metals as come my way. But, so far, my search has been without result. Still, I have hopes. But I beg your several individual and distinct pardons. I believe I did not give you a chance to tell anything about yourselves. Whence came you, and whither art thou going—*quo vadis*, as the ancients say?"

"We—we don't know exactly," said John.

"Ah!"

It was but a slight expression from the lips of the professor, but it indicated much.

"When did you run away from home?" he asked a moment later.

The three boys started.

"How did you know?" began Pete.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the man. "I thought I would get you there. Know you not that all secrets are mine for the reading? Have I not glanced at your palms? But fear not. It's all right. I know what it is to be young—to have desires to see the world—to be misunderstood——"

"That's it," said John eagerly. "It's all a mistake. We——"

The professor stopped him with a gesture.

"Tut-tut!" he said. "What I don't know I can never tell. I appreciate your difficulty. I may even be of service to you. Would you like to travel with me?"

The sudden invitation nearly took away the breath of the boys. The professor noted their astonishment. He assumed a more serious air.

"I mean it," he said. "As I told you, I am a traveling vender of patent medicines, soaps and so on. With my selling, I mingle harmless patter, some fortune telling by means of palmistry, and a little entertainment. The entertainment part of my program consisted, up to a few days ago, of a combined clown and trickster. He left me in a fit of passion, and I am without an assistant. I come upon you, most unexpectedly. I like your looks. I think we could be mutually helpful. You could be my three entertainers, and, at the same time, see much of the world and life. What do you say? Is it a bargain?"

"But we—we don't know how to do anything," said John slowly.

"Tut—tut! A mere nothing. In three days I will teach you more than my faithless clown knew. A few songs, some verses—a little dance—what do you say—will you come? See, we shall make a fine company, three bright lads, a lame dog, a horse that may take us to the river of gold—and, lastly, Theophilus Clatter and his patter. What do you say?"

The three brothers hesitated. They felt that they could not go back to Freeport—at least for a time—yet they must live. Here seemed the very chance they

needed. John looked at his brothers. They nodded an assent.

“I—I guess we’ll go with you,” he said.

“Good!” exclaimed the professor heartily, and that was how those Smith boys joined a patent medicine show.

CHAPTER XVI

DRAWING A CROWD

"Now," resumed Professor Clatter, when he had shaken hands with the three lads, which he did in a slow and methodical fashion, quite in contrast to his other rapid movements, "now we'll talk business. I've been sort of hanging back from playing any of the big towns, because I needed an attraction to draw a crowd. I've got it, and we'll proceed to Hillsboro. I've got quite a stock of medicine and soap to dispose of, for Pactolus doesn't seem inclined to wade into that golden river, and we must have money, eh—what's your dog's name?" he asked quickly. "I always like to know the names of animals I travel with."

"Waggles," replied Pete.

"That's no name at all. We must get him a classical one, but that will do for a time."

Waggles waved his bushy tail to and fro, and limped upon three legs, to rub against the professor.

"What's the matter with his leg?" asked the owner of the gaudy wagon.

"Broke," replied John. "We had an encounter with a burg—a tramp, and he kicked him."

"Who bandaged it?"

"I did."

"Hum. Pretty fair. Pretty fair," murmured Mr.

Clatter. "I have some small skill in surgery myself, and I could not have done better. But to business. Now since you three young gentlemen have decided to come with me, let us talk terms. I paid my other helper fifteen dollars a week. That's about all I can afford. What do you say to dividing that among you, me to furnish transportation, food, lodging for yourself and beast—by beast meaning Waggles, who is shortly to have another name? What do you say to that?"

"That's all right," replied John, looking around to see if his brothers agreed with him, which they did. "But can we all travel in that wagon?"

"Can we? Well, we just can!" exclaimed the professor proudly. "I have traveled in it for several years, and carried a big stock. Come, let me show you."

He entered the queer vehicle, going up the steps at the rear, the boys following. They saw that the wagon was more commodious than they supposed. It was really divided into two rooms, or compartments. The forward one had four shelf-like bunks, two on either side, and they were fitted with small mattresses, and bed clothes.

"Here's where we'll sleep in cold and stormy weather," said Mr. Clatter. "At other times, we may, if we like, erect a tent in the open, and repose there. Now the rear part, as you observe, is at once my living room and store."

The boys saw that it contained some small chairs, a miniature table, many boxes, and closets arranged along the sides. There was a place where the stove could be set up, and a small sideboard that included within itself a miniature kitchen.

"Here is where we will live, move and have our being," continued the professor. "Here is where I address the multitudes from, building out a small stage or platform when necessary. I shall do that now that I have quite a traveling company. In front is where the driver sits, and there is room for two, including the dog, or, I should say, in addition to the dog, Waggles, whose name is shortly to be changed. Now then, how do you like it?"

The wagon was really quite wonderfully made, and was not a half bad conveyance in which to go about the country. It was substantially built, and every inch of space was utilized.

"It's fine," declared John.

"All to the mustard," was Pete's opinion.

"How's that?" asked the professor, evidently puzzled.

"I mean it's pippy, all to the lolly-pops—fine—grand—just the cheese," explained Pete.

"Ah, I see. You use terms of eating to describe that which especially pleases you. Very good idea, very good indeed. I am glad you like my private car. It took a great deal of thought to build it. Do you think you can sojourn in it for a while?"

"Sure," replied William. "It'll be sport, going around in this. We can stay away as long as we like—until—until——"

"No confidences," interrupted the professor. "I don't ask why you left home. Doubtless you had good reasons. Enough if this pleases you. Now then, I'll hitch Pactolus to this chariot of fire, if you gentlemen will kindly place in their proper places the various articles I

have taken from the wagon. You will find each one numbered, and the compartment where it is to go bears a corresponding numeral. In that way nothing is displaced. There is nothing like system."

He went around to the front of the wagon to get the horse, which had stopped eating grass, and the boys proceeded to put back into the vehicle the various breakfast things; the dishes, pans and other utensils having been returned to their proper boxes. They found, as Mr. Clatter had said, that there was a numbered space for each object, and, when all had been fitted in, the rear compartment of the wagon was still quite roomy.

"All aboard," called the professor. "Which of you boys is going to ride with me?"

"You'd better, John," suggested William. "You can find out what we're expected to do, and tell us."

John took his place on the front seat, with the owner of the outfit, Waggles was lifted up between them, William and Pete took their places in the rear compartment, seating themselves in the small chairs, and the horse was started.

"We will go to Hillsboro," said Mr. Clatter to John, as they jogged along. "There I will get a license to dispose of my goods, and we will start in to make our fortunes."

"But I'm afraid my brothers and I can't do anything much to help you," objected John.

"We will not attempt anything much at first," replied Mr. Clatter. "You can sing, can't you?"

"A little."

"That will do. I will play the banjo, and you boys

can sing. That will attract a crowd, which I will hold with a few simple sleight of hand tricks, and some of Clatter's matchless patter, until I can begin to talk the merits of my medicine. Then in a few days, you will learn something new. Oh, it will be easy."

John was a bit doubtful, but he saw nothing else for his brothers and himself to do, except become tramps, and he did not like to do that. After all, the patent medicine and soap show might not be so bad.

On the trip to Hillsboro Mr. Clatter gave the boys some copies of songs, telling them to learn the words. The tunes were familiar airs, and, during a halt for lunch, on a lonesome country road, beside a small brook, he got out his banjo, and they had a little practice.

"Fine!" he cried, when the boys had sung one verse. "Better than I expected! You will do famously!"

The Smith boys had good voices, and they had often taken part in school entertainments at home.

They reached Hillsboro, a good sized city, late in the afternoon. During their progress through the streets many stared at the odd looking vehicle, and John hoped no one would recognize him, as he sat on the front seat. Still, as he had seldom been in Hillsboro, and knew no one there, he had little fear.

The necessary license was procured, and arrangements made for the night's business. Instead of eating in the wagon, which, if done in the city streets would be sure to attract an undesirable crowd, the professor went to a small hotel, where he and the boys had a meal.

"Now for our contest with fortune," he said, as they entered the vehicle which had been drawn up at a busy

corner. "Don your court suits, young gentlemen, if you please."

From one of the many compartments of his wagon the professor, that day, had produced three suits of gaudy color. Mingled red, green, blue, yellow, and purple were they, with glittering spangles, and tinkling bells. They fitted the boys fairly well.

"I once had a troupe of three dancers," explained the patent medicine man. "I am glad I saved the suits. They become you most excellently."

The brothers were in some doubt on this point, but they made no objections.

From the rear of the wagon a small platform had been built out, and the end compartment of the vehicle was concealed from the expected crowd, by a curtain. Gasoline torches had been hung on either side of the platform, and these were now lighted, throwing a glaring illumination on the scene. The professor set his boxes of soap and bottles of medicine under a small table.

"You boys remain behind the curtain until I signal you to come out," he said. "When you do, you will be ready to sing."

Taking his place behind the table on the platform the professor, stood for a moment in the glare of the gasoline lamps. Then, raising his hands high in the air, and shaking his shock of black hair he cried in a loud voice:

"Help! Help! Help!"

His strident tones carried far. People in the street stopped, and gazed wonderingly at him. From distant thoroughfares the crowds began running.

"Help! Help! Help!"

Thus cried Theophilus Clatter, wildly waving his arms above his head.

The people began to throng about his wagon, more joining the assemblage every moment.

"Help! Help! Help!"

It was a wild shout now, and one or two policemen added their presence to the throng. Seated back of the curtain, in comparative darkness, John, William and Pete began to wonder if the professor had not gone suddenly insane.

"Did you ever hear such a voice?" asked Pete.

"It certainly is drawing the crowd," added William, peering through a crack. "There's a mob out there."

"Help! Help! Help!"

Once more the startling cry.

Then the professor, lowering his arms, brushed back the hair that he had shaken over his eyes, looked over the big throng, smiled in a pleasant manner, and said:

"People, I thank you for coming so quickly when I called. Help, in time of need, is man's greatest blessing. I have come here to help you. Listen!"

The professor had begun his usual evening patter.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. STANTON BUYS SOAP

Pausing a moment, to let what he had said sink into the minds of his expectant audience, the professor resumed.

"Yes, dear people, help is a great thing. You need it, I need it. We can be mutually helpful to each other."

"Aw, what yer drivin' at?" asked a man in front of the little platform.

"My friend asks what I am driving at," said Mr. Clatter with great good nature. "I will tell you presently. Friends you have heard that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Now I——"

"Aw, we had a feller here last night, sellin' a new kind of breakfast food," said another man, "but it was only sawdust pressed into cakes. None of that for us!"

"Very true, my dear friend," admitted the professor. "I have no sawdust breakfast food for you, however. You doubtless have heard of Orpheus who charmed even the savage beasts by his music. Now, Orpheus——"

"Where'd he live?" went on the man, interrupting again.

The professor did not lose his temper. Instead he calmly replied:

"He lived where gentlemen are in the habit of congregating."

"That'll hold him for a while!" exclaimed several, and the man slunk away.

"Now, friends," went on Mr. Clatter, "I know you all love music. Ah, there is charm, even in the name. We all feel better, happier and more inspired when we hear the strains of music. Just now I called for help. I am going to help you forget your troubles in music. For that you have troubles I am well convinced. All mortal men have them. But, for a time, you will forget yours. I have with me, a troupe of sweet singers, noble youth, whom I have imported at a great expense, and, with your kind permission and attention, I will now introduce them to you."

The professor gave a signal, and, from behind the curtain came William, Pete and John, in their gay attire. There was a murmur from the throng, and the boys began to feel an attack of stage fright.

"Steady," whispered the professor to them. "Just forget all about the crowd. We'll try the first song."

He took up his banjo, rendered a few chords with a skillful hand, and began the air.

The boys, with voices a trifle weak at first, gradually gained confidence, and soon were singing well. They finished the song, and there was considerable applause.

"What did I tell you?" asked the professor of the crowd. "You feel better already. Now we will have another."

The boys sang once more, doing better.

"That'll be all for a while," said Mr. Clatter in a low voice, as the applause broke out again. "You may go back now, and when I want you I'll let you know."

Rather relieved that they had gotten through so well, John and his brothers passed behind the curtain, and sat down in the rear of the wagon.

"Who ever would have thought that we'd be doing this?" asked Pete.

"It wasn't so bad," declared John. "I think it's fun."

"So do I," agreed William. "I hope nobody recognized us though."

"No danger, with these rigs on," was John's opinion. "But let's listen to what he's saying."

Out on his little platform the professor was again addressing the throng.

"Now, my friends," he said, "I trust you are in a mood to hear what I have to say. The sweet music has put you in tune with me. Listen. You all know that flesh is weak. From the days of our childhood to old age, we are constantly fighting off disease and death. Now, none of you may feel ill at this moment, but you can not tell when you will. In case any of you should, I have that here which will be of great help to you.

"Allow me to make you acquainted with my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative. Should you have a pain, no matter where, a few drops of this magical remedy will relieve it. If it is on the outside, rub a little on the affected part. Should it come from within, take a few drops. The effect will be magical."

"Is it good for toothache?" asked a man, with a swollen jaw.

"Nothing better," replied Mr. Clatter. "Just come here, my friend, and I will demonstrate."

The man went up to the platform, the professor

rubbed a little of the remedy on the sufferer's gum, and asked:

"How about it? Is the pain gone?"

"It's stopped, some," admitted the man.

"Of course. Naturally. No pain can exist where my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative is. Let me put a few more drops on."

The professor stooped over, and shoved his finger into the open mouth of a man standing close to the platform.

"Here! What you doing?" demanded the surprised individual. "I don't want none of your old stuff in my mouth!"

"I thought you said you had the toothache," said the professor. "I was giving you a second application."

"Naw, I ain't got no toothache."

"It's me," remarked the man standing next to him. "You made a mistake."

"Ah," observed Mr. Clatter, in no whit perturbed by his error, "accidents will happen. But, my friend, did you have a pain anywhere?" and he addressed the man who had objected to the remedy.

"Naw, I ain't got no pain."

"Then you won't get any for some time to come," said the professor. "Those few drops of my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, which I accidentally put in your mouth, will make you immune from pain for a week to come. It was a fortunate accident."

"Well, I don't want no more," said the man, moving away.

"Now, my dear friend, let me administer a bit more

to your aching tooth," went on Mr. Clatter. "The second application will surely stop it."

Grinning sheepishly, the man submitted to have some more of the mixture rubbed on his gums.

"Now, your pain is entirely relieved," declared the vendor confidently. "Isn't it?"

vender confidently. "Isn't it?"

"I told you so. Now who wants a bottle of my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative? The regular price is one dollar, but for a limited time only, and merely to introduce it among you, I will dispose of it for twenty-five cents a bottle for the large size, and ten cents for the small. Remember I guarantee it to cure every pain that flesh is heir to, and if it does not, come to me and get your money back. You are running no risk. Come now, who'll have the first bottle of Professor Theophilus Clatter's Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative?"

There was some hesitation, and then the crowd began to buy. The professor, talking meanwhile of the virtues of his medicine, disposed of considerable of it. When the crowd showed a disposition to buy no more, he said:

"Now I will have my troupe of sweet singers discourse melodious music for you."

He gave the boys a signal to come out, and they rendered two songs.

"Now, friends," went on the professor, "while I have thus far administered to your bodily ailments, that is not the only thing that I can do. Doubtless, at some time or other, you men may have had the misfortune

to get a spot on your clothes, or you ladies on your dresses. If such has happened, be not discouraged. Professor Theophilus Clatter, in spite of his patter, has come here to help you. With my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent, or my Spotless Saponifier, the most obstinate spot will vanish as do the mists before the sun."

He talked much more in the same strain, concerning his soap, and then began to sell it. The soap seemed to take with the crowd and he did a rushing business, so much so that he had to call the boys to help him hand out the packages and take the money.

A man pushed his way through the crowd, to the edge of the platform.

"Will that soap take out ink spots?" he asked.

"It certainly will," replied the professor. "Or paint spots, or oil spots, or acid spots, or dirt spots, or grease spots or milk spots or any kind of spots. It is only ten cents a cake, and——"

"Give me two cakes," said the man, handing up two dimes to William. William gave one look at the man. To his alarm he recognized him as Mr. Stanton, the surveyor whose tent the hand car had demolished.

Thinking nothing else but that the railroad surveyor was on his trail, and had come to cause his arrest, William, with a muttered excuse, turned and fled behind the curtain.

"Here, where's my soap?" called Mr. Stanton, for William had carried off his two dimes.

"Here you are," said John, who had seen his brother's action.

He handed over two cakes of the soap, and then, in his turn, recognizing the surveyor, he also ducked behind the curtain.

A moment later, Pete, also catching a glimpse of the man for whom he his brothers had caused so much trouble, darted into the back of the wagon, while the professor, not knowing what to make of such conduct, paused in his rapid-fire talk, and ceased to hand out the soap and take in the money.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WEATHER PROPHET

"Friends," exclaimed the professor, not knowing in the least why the three boys had so suddenly disappeared, "my sweet singers have felt the muse of music approaching. They have but retired to get ready to entertain you once more."

The professor was quick to take advantage of every emergency, no matter what it was.

"We will now entertain you for a short time," he continued, reaching for his banjo, and twanging a few chords.

The boys were quick to take advantage of this. At the signal they came out, and, though they looked fearfully around for a sight of Mr. Stanton they did not see him.

"He wouldn't know us, anyhow, in these clothes," said John quickly, to his brothers.

After the singing, which the boys managed to get through with, more or less successfully, the selling of the soap was resumed. It was kept up until the crowd showed, by buying no more, that enough had been disposed of, then the professor, with a final burst of patter, announced that he would be at the same spot to-morrow night.

As the throng dispersed, Mr. Clatter went in behind the curtain, where the boys had already gone.

"Say, what was the matter?" asked the professor. "Why did you duck in here so quickly, just when the soap was going like hot cakes. You nearly queered my business."

"I—I saw a man," said William.

"That's nothing," declared their employer. "I saw a lot of men. What's the matter with you boys, anyhow?"

They were silent for a moment, debating in their minds whether or not to tell the professor their story.

"He was a man—a man we didn't want to meet," explained John.

"Say, look here," said Mr. Clatter roughly, but good naturedly, "maybe you'd better tell me about yourselves after all. I can't have things like this happening every night. Was that any of your folks after you?"

"No," said John, "it was a man that a hand car ran into a water tank and it knocked his tent over and—and——"

"What!" cried Mr. Clatter. "A man that a hand car ran into a water tank—what kind of talk is that?"

"I'll tell you," said John, and he proceeded to explain why they ran away from home.

"Well, of all the stories I ever heard!" exclaimed the professor, "that's the limit! Why did you go to the railroad camp?"

"To look for the man without a thumb," explained Pete.

"The man without a thumb?" repeated Mr. Clatter.

"I guess I'd better explain from the beginning," said John, and he proceeded to do so, starting with how they went out to fly their kite, which took little Susie Mantell up into the air, and ending with their flight by night.

"Hum," said Mr. Clatter, when the lad had finished. "And so you are still looking for the man without a thumb?"

"We are," said William, "but I don't believe we'll ever find him."

"And you think he is in this neighborhood?" asked the professor.

"It looks so, seeing that he was in the cave," replied Pete.

"Hum," remarked Mr. Clatter again. "Let me think a minute," he added.

He began pacing up and down the narrow confines of the rear of the wagon. He could take a step and a half in one direction, and two in the other. Still, it seemed to serve his purpose.

"I have it!" he exclaimed at length.

"Do you know the man without a thumb?" asked John.

"No, but I think I know a way to catch him."

"How?"

"I'll tell you. You know I am a palmist. Sometimes, when I find the crowd does not take to my patter, or to the music, I read palms for them. I distribute pieces of paper, covered with a black substance. I tell the people to press their palms firmly on the black

surface. They do so. Some of it comes off on their hands. Then they press their palms down on a white piece of paper, leaving an impression of their hand. These I read from the platform, telling the past, present and future in truly a marvelous manner."

The professor was beginning on his pattering strain. He observed this, and stopped.

"What I propose is this," he said. "In every place where we stop, I will give a palm-reading exhibition. I will invite every one to submit a sample of his hand. Of course I can not read them all, but I will do as many as I can. Every one will be eager to submit his or hers, as there is nothing that so catches the public as a chance to learn something about themselves by fortune telling.

"Now you believe the thumbless robber is in this vicinity. It may be that he will attend one of my lectures. If he does, and hands in a piece of paper, with an impression of his palm I will know it instantly. Then, one of you can slip off, warn the police, and cause his arrest. The absence of his thumb will plainly show on the impression on the paper. Boys, I think I can help you to find the robber!"

The boys were silent a moment. It was a plan that seemed very strange to them. Yet it might succeed. There would be no harm in trying.

"What do you say?" asked the professor.

"We'll be much obliged to you for your help," said John.

"That's what we will," chimed in William. "If we

could get dad's three thousand dollars back it would be a great thing."

"And now about yourselves," went on the professor. "How long are you going to stay from home?"

"Until it's safe to go back," said Pete. "We don't want to be arrested. We thought Mr. Stanton was after us, but maybe he was only here by accident. Still, we don't want to be caught."

"I don't blame you. As long as you have gone this far you may as well continue. But I must ask you to send some word to your father. Doubtless he is much worried about you. It will do no harm, for the authorities can not trace you by a letter, and it will greatly relieve his mind. Will you do this?"

"Yes," agreed John, and he wrote and posted a letter that night, telling why he and his brothers had run away, and assuring Mr. Smith that they were all right, and would return as soon as they thought it safe. But John gave no address where his father could communicate with him.

"Now," said the professor, when this had been done, "we will hie ourselves to a quieter place to sleep."

He got his horse from the hotel, hitched him to the gaudy wagon, and drove into the outskirts of Hillsboro, where the boys and their employer prepared to spend the night in the bunks in the vehicle.

They went out about two miles, and found a good place along the main road, under a clump of elm trees.

"I will hobble Pactolus, so that he will not stray to that golden river in the night," said the professor, "and then we will seek our downy beds."

As he led the horse to the fence, where he proposed tying him through the night, William, looking out of one of the windows of the wagon, saw another vehicle standing on the other side of the road. It was a queer affair, with something like a big stove pipe sticking out from the top, and seemed, in the dim light from the medicine wagon, to be of extraordinary strong construction.

"There's some else here, professor," the boy said, as Mr. Clatter came back, from having fastened his horse.

"Some one else?"

"Yes, there's another wagon over there."

Mr. Clatter looked where William pointed. As they watched they saw a figure emerge from it. The figure carried a lantern. and approached their own vehicle, and coming close called out:

"Whom have we here? Is it a rival, or some person whose scientific attainments do not conflict with my own?"

"Ha! I should know that voice!" cried the professor. "Is it not Duodecimo Donaldby?"

"It is that same," replied the stranger. "And, may I shatter a cirrus nimbus, if I do not behold my old friend and side-partner Theophilus Clatter."

"You needn't shatter any rain clouds to-night," said the professor with a laugh. "Shake hands, you old weather prophet; shake! How is the world using you?"

"Never better. I have had most excellent results. And you, Theophilus?"

“Fair, fair. My Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent and my Spotless Saponifier seem to please the public. But come in. I have companions who will be glad to meet you,” and he led him inside the gaudy wagon.

CHAPTER XIX

SEEKING CLUES

"Boys," said Mr. Clatter, as he waved his hand toward the figure of the weather prophet, "allow me to present you to my old friend, my sometimes partner and fellow worker, Duodecimo Donaldby. He holds the secrets of nature in the hollow of his hand, and he can make rain water of the parched dust. Duodecimo, these are some traveling friends of mine, who have cast their lot in with me. The celebrated Smith boys, the only ones of their name," and he laughed good-naturedly.

"Smith—Smith," murmured Mr. Donaldby. "The name does sound familiar. But I am glad to meet you. I was just wishing I had some one to join my lonely meal."

"Then you haven't dined yet," spoke the professor. "You shall have a late supper with us. Boys, set out the fairy table. What ho! Mercurio! Avaunt thee! Haste! Haste. A guest awaits! Bring viands that he may dine!"

The professor clapped his hands three times, whirled about in the middle of the small room, and then set to work with the aid of the boys, in getting a midnight lunch, for it was close to that hour.

The antics of the inventor of the Pain Preventative,

the Resolvent and other things did not seem to surprise the weather prophet. The boys glanced at him, and saw a thin man, with a straggly beard, clothed in rusty black, and wearing a tall hat, from which escaped long, straggling hair. This, too, was much the worse for wear. The weather prophet had a sandy complexion, and watery blue eyes. Altogether he was not a very pleasing individual. He took a seat in one of the chairs, in a corner out of the way, and watched the others bustling about as well as they could in the small space.

"Mr. Duodecimo Donaldby, I may as well tell you, boys, is a wonderful character," went on the professor. "He not only predicts what the weather is going to be, but actually makes his own predictions come to pass. He is——"

"Now don't lay it on too strong, Theophilus," pleaded the prophet. "You know your failing. He doesn't mean to deceive you boys, but he is naturally of an enthusiastic temperament," said Mr. Donaldby. "My only abilities lie in being able to make a fairly accurate prediction as to what the weather is going to be, and I may say that I have had fair success in producing rain in arid regions."

"Do you really make it rain?" asked William.

"I do," answered the prophet with a bow, removing his somewhat battered tile.

"By exploding dynamite up in the air?" added John.

"Ha, you have some knowledge of science, I see!" exclaimed the prophet.

"Well, they tried that at a fair we had in Freeport once," explained Pete. "It didn't work, though."

"Perchance some mere amateur attempted it," said the weather man. "There are many nice particulars to be observed. If you remain with Professor Clatter, perchance you may observe them."

"Are you going to make it rain here?" asked William. "I didn't bring any umbrella——"

"I have just arrived here," went on Mr. Donaldby. "I have not yet had time to find out if they need my services. How about it, Theophilus? Have they had rain here lately, or are the crops suffering from drouth, so that I may be in a position to offer my services?"

"If you were the other kind of a magician," said Mr. Clatter, "you might serve them. It has rained for nearly a week, I am told, and has just stopped."

"Just my luck," observed the prophet. "I shall have to travel farther on, and I hoped to replenish my treasury here, for I don't mind admitting that my funds are getting low."

"Don't worry about that," said the professor. "I am doing well. If you wait a few days I may accompany you."

"Ha! What keeps you in such a small town so long?" asked the weather prophet. "You seldom linger more than a day and a night."

"I have a mission. We are seeking—these boys and I—for a thumbless man."

"A thumbless man?"

"Exactly—a robber," and he proceeded to relate the

story of the boys' quest, and how they hoped to find the thief by means of palmistry.

"Hum," murmured the weather prophet. "Not a bad idea; not half bad, by my stratus-nimbus!"

"We are going to stay a few more nights in Hillsboro," went on the professor, and you might as well remain here too. In that time we may hear of some region needing rain, where you can exercise your talents. You know," Mr. Clatter continued, turning to the three boys, "my friend Duodecimo has a sort of miniature mortar in his wagon. He fires a bomb high into the air, and it explodes, shattering the rain clouds, and bringing down the moisture."

"It does when it works," added the prophet. "But oft times a nimbus cloud merges into a cumulus, or a cirrus-stratus; or a stratus that looks promising is blown into a cumulus—Oh, it is not all easy sailing."

"No, of course not," admitted the professor. "But come, Mercurio has our repast ready; let us dine."

They sat down to a simple meal in the wagon, rather crowded as to space, but no one seemed to mind, particularly not the boys, for they were hungry.

They had scarcely finished the meal, during which the professor and the prophet talked of their past experiences, when there sounded outside the patent medicine wagon a series of yelps, howls, barks, screeches, screams and growls.

"Ha! One of those voices seems to be that of Scratch, my cat," observed the prophet, rising hastily.

"And the other is Waggles, our dog," observed John,

hurrying to the door of the wagon. "Waggles hates cats."

"And Scratch, my cat, hates dogs," added the prophet. "I think we had best separate them."

When the door was opened the noise of the two animals in dispute sounded more plainly.

"Waggles! Here! Stop that!" cried John, and, with a whine the dog ran around into the light that streamed from the wagon door. Upon his shoulders was perched a big, black cat, which seemed twice its natural size, with arched back and swelled up tail.

"Look at that!" cried Pete. "No wonder Waggles howled."

"Scratch! Here!" called the prophet, and the cat leaped down, and, with a spring perched upon his shoulder, its greenish-yellow eyes fairly snapping at the crouching dog.

"I hope they will get on better terms," remarked the professor. "If we are to travel in company it will not be pleasant to have them quarreling all the while."

"Oh, I can make Waggles stop," said John. "Here, sir!" he called to the dog. "No cats! Understand! No cats!" and he pointed to the black creature on the prophet's shoulder.

Waggles thumped his tail up and down on the ground.

"Scratch!" exclaimed the prophet. "Don't annoy Waggles. He'll not touch you!"

The cat growled, but its tail seemed to shrink in size, and the arch of its back was not so pronounced.

"Perhaps we can make them at least declare an armistice," said Mr. Clatter.

"Lie down, Waggles," ordered John, and the dog crawled under the wagon.

"I thought I shut my cat up in my wagon," said Mr. Donaldby. "She must have gotten out. However it doesn't matter. I think they may make friends."

It was getting late, and the boys plainly showed how tired they were. The professor noticed it.

"You had better turn in," he said. "I'll come to bed myself, presently."

The three brothers were glad to avail themselves of the opportunity, and they passed into the forward part of the wagon, where the bunks had been made up. The professor and the prophet remained up for some time longer, conversing in low tones in the rear of the vehicle. The boys could hear them, and their conversation was of the patent medicine, soap and palmistry which formed Mr. Clatter's stock-in-trade, and of weather, explosives, cirrus-cumulus, cumulus-stratus and stratus-nimbus, on the part of the prophet.

"I wonder what cirrus-cumulus and stratus-nimbus and all those names mean?" asked William, as he was undressing.

"They're names of clouds," said John. "Don't you remember we studied about them in physical geography. I remember that a nimbus is a rain cloud, and a cumulus is a big fluffy pile of clouds."

"Do you really s'pose he makes rain?" asked William.

"Oh, I don't know," answered John. "I'm too sleepy to care much."

"Do you know what I think?" inquired Pete.

"Tell us, quick," advised his older brother.

"I think the professor and the prophet are both a couple of fakes," said Pete in a whisper. "They're regular swindlers, traveling about to get money any way they can."

"Perhaps," admitted John, "but we can't help it. The professor doesn't seem to be so bad, and he helped us out of a hole. We'll stick to him for a while."

"All right, Cap," said Pete. "Just as you say," and the three brothers dropped off to sleep. The last thing they remembered being conscious of were the droning voices of the professor and the prophet.

In the morning, after a hasty breakfast, the prophet invited them to see the apparatus in his wagon. The vehicle, except for being much heavier built, was somewhat like the one owned by the professor. There were only small living quarters in it, however, most of the space being taken up by a large mortar, the muzzle of which was thrust out through the roof, while a big steel ammunition box occupied a large space, and was marked "DANGEROUS—EXPLOSIVES" in big, white letters.

"I'd like to see it work," said Pete.

"So would I," added William, and even John admitted that it might be interesting.

"Perhaps you may, soon," said the prophet.

In the gaudy medicine wagon the professor and the boys went into town that morning. They halted on a

busy corner, and when a crowd had collected, by means of the singing of the lads, or the calling of the professor's strident voice, the selling of the soap and medicine began.

Not forgetting his promise to use his palmistry game to get a clue to the thumbless man, the professor read numberless hands, the impressions of which were handed up on the blank pieces of paper. Most of these were women's, but there were a few men, and these were eagerly scanned, to see if any of the palms were without thumbs.

At night, when much larger crowds gathered, the same performance was gone through with, many palms being inspected but with no result. The professor did a rushing business, however, and the boys were kept busy, in the intervals of singing, handing out soap and medicine. At night they went back to where the prophet's wagon was halted, and had a late supper together.

Waggles and Scratch seemed to have become friends. At least they did not fight, though occasionally there were growls and snarls.

They remained in Hillsboro for three days, vainly seeking clues to the thumbless man. Then, as the town had been pretty well "worked," as the professor expressed it, they decided to travel on, the prophet agreeing to accompany them until he found an arid region that needed rain.

CHAPTER XX

A HOLD UP

Along the country road went the two wagons. It was a pleasant morning, just warm enough, and the recent rains had laid the dust so that traveling was a pleasure.

"This isn't so bad," remarked John, who had been allowed to drive the professor's horse, the medicine man having gone to ride in the weather prophet's wagon for a few miles, so that he could talk to his former partner. "How do you like it, fellows," and he turned to his two brothers, who had managed to squeeze into the seat beside him.

"It's all right while it lasts," admitted William.

"And I'm getting used to being a public performer," added Pete.

"If you don't improve in your singing you won't be a performer in this outfit long," observed John. "You simply howled in the chorus."

"I did not. That was Waggles under the wagon," declared Pete. "I sang as good as you did."

"That's not saying much," observed William. "If you fellows want to be really good singers, why listen to me."

"Not now, for goodness's sake!" exclaimed John, placing his hand over his brother's mouth, which had

opened to begin a song. "All nature is at peace and quietness; don't disturb her. You might scare the horse."

"Humph! Think you're smart; don't you?" asked William, as he struggled to remove John's hand.

"Promise not to sing, and I'll let you go," said his older brother.

"I promise," mumbled the smaller lad, and peace was restored.

"I wonder how long we'll keep this up," ventured Pete. "Do you think we'll ever find that robber?"

"I don't know," observed John. "It seems like a pretty slim chance to me, but the professor is hopeful. He says the world is made up of slim chances. I guess it's as good a way as any other. The police can't seem to do anything."

"Poor dad," remarked William. "It seems sort of mean to leave him all alone, and him in trouble over the loss of his money. We ought to go home."

"Can't," was John's opinion. "If we do we're likely to be run out of town, on account of that railroad trouble. We might even be arrested. Then we couldn't do dad any good—we'd only be a disgrace to him."

"But maybe he is in trouble over the loss of his money," went on William. "You know he said he might have to give up his business."

"Well, we couldn't help him much."

"We could go to work."

"I don't believe anybody in Freeport would give us work, after—well, after what's happened. I think

we're better off where we are. We're earning something, and it isn't costing us anything for board, which it would at home. We can send dad some money if you like, as soon as the professor pays us."

"That would be a good idea," admitted Pete. "But maybe he's worrying about where we are."

"He knows we can take care of ourselves," declared John. "Besides we wrote to him, telling him we were all right. No, I don't see that we can do any better than stay with the professor for a while. It's nice, traveling around this way, and we're earning some money. I like it, but, of course, I'll be glad when it's safe to go home again."

"Same here," came fervently from William. "And, when I get there, I'm going to let hand cars alone."

"Right, Oh!" exclaimed Pete. "Say, though, I don't much fancy keeping too close to the prophet's wagon. Suppose it should hit a big bump. He told us he had a lot of dynamite in that box, to shoot off in his compressed air mortar."

"Oh, I don't believe there's much danger," said John. "Mr. Donaldby seems careful. I don't think much of him, though. I believe he's a worse fake than the professor, with his soap and patent medicine. He, at least, gives you something for your money. But the weather prophet——"

"He gives the people a big noise, anyhow," observed Pete.

"Yes, that's so. But if the professor wants to travel with him, I don't see that we can object. Maybe he'll

strike a dry region soon, and stay there to make rain, while we travel on."

"Maybe," said William.

When they had gone several miles the professor came back to take charge of his own wagon and the three boys elected to ride in the rear compartment. They halted for dinner beside a little brook near the road, and, while the two horses cropped the long, rich grass, the two men, and the boys, to say nothing of Waggles the dog and Scratch the cat, made a hearty meal.

"And now to see what fortune holds in store for us at the next town," said the professor, when, having rested on a grassy bank, he was ready to proceed.

"What place is it?" asked the weather prophet.

"Pokeville," replied Mr. Clatter. "You and I once did it as traveling minstrels, when I was selling—Ha! Hum! What was I selling? Oh, I remember, it was a patent lamp."

"The kind that melted soon after it was lighted?" asked the prophet.

"The same. We cleaned up a pretty nice sum."

"Yes; and then the authorities ran us out of the place. Oh, Pokeville isn't as slow as the name indicates. Do you think they'll recognize us again?"

"Not me," replied the professor, gazing down at his gaudy red and black vest. "As for you, with that long hair, your own brother wouldn't recognize you."

"Never had a brother," answered the rain-maker briefly. "But come on, it's getting late, and Pokeville lies five miles beyond us yet."

"Yes, let us be up and doing," agreed the professor.

“Mercurio, help me up!” and, being rather stout, the professor had some difficulty in regaining his feet.

The horses were again hitched up, and soon the two vehicles, the professor’s in the advance, were on the move, down the winding road.

About three miles from the town, they had to pass through a rather lonely stretch of woods, and, as it was known to be the camping place of many tramps, in the summer time, the professor called to Mr. Donaldby to bring his vehicle closer, that they might, by a show of strength, frighten off any possible marauders.

“I heard that there were several hold-ups in this vicinity last month,” said the professor, as he urged his horse to a trot. “And, as I have rather a large sum——”

He had hardly spoken, addressing his words to William, who was on the seat with him, when, from the bushes that lined the roadway, sprang several men. Two of them held revolvers.

“Hold on dere!” exclaimed one, leveling his weapon at the professor. “Stop!”

The professor pulled up his horse so sharply that the animal slid several feet.

“What do you want?” demanded the medicine man.

“Easy now, cully, easy,” advised the leader of the tramps, for such their ragged clothes, and unshaved faces declared the men to be. “Easy now. Sim, you look to the chariot in de rear, an’ I’ll do wot’s needed here. I’ll have to ask youse to step down offen dat dere circus wagon,” went on the man with the revolver, while his companion started back to the prophet’s wagon.

"Come down? What for?" demanded Mr. Clatter. "What right have you to stop us on a public road? I shall have you arrested!"

"Easy now, cully," admonished the tramp. "Dere ain't no cops widin' a mile, an' we is goin' t' have t'ings our own way. We knows youse has got money, 'cause a friend of mine seen your work in Hillsboro. We's been waitin' fer youse. Now, if youse'll come down, an' stand on dis side of de road, an' your young friends wot's wid youse 'll do the same, dere won't be no trouble. Oderwise I may have t' take unpleasant means of gittin' wot I desire, as de elephant said to de cocoanut tree. Come on down, now, youse; an' me friends'll investigate an' see wot's in de swell omnibus. We only wants coin, so youse needn't be afraid dat youse'll be robbed of any of yer household goods."

"Are you—are you going to rob me?" gasped the professor, his face turning pale.

"Dat's jest wot I'm goin' t' do. Come down, now, cully, an' don't be all day about it. Me time is limited. I've got an engagement," and the tramp leader grinned, while his companions advanced toward the two wagons. More of the ragged men came from the bushes.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PROFESSOR IN TROUBLE

"This is outrageous!" exclaimed the professor.

"Dat's what youse t'inks," replied the tramp leader. "We don't. We need de money. Come now, no monkeyin'," and he waved his revolver in a threatening manner.

"Haven't you a weapon?" asked William, in a low voice.

"I have, but it's back in the rear compartment," replied Mr. Clatter.

"Maybe John will think to use it," went on William, when the tramp leader interrupted with:

"Come now, no chinnin'. Git a move on! We can't wait all day. Git now, an' we'll see wot youse has got!"

Very reluctantly the professor prepared to descend. William followed him.

"Say, Josh," called one of the tramp leader's companions, "dere's only a couple of kids back here."

"Make 'em git down," came the order. "Now, den," to the professor and William, "hands up. We might as well do dis t'ing in style."

He pointed his weapon at them, and they had no choice but to obey.

"See wot dey has in der pockets," directed the leader

to one of his men, whose chief attire seemed to consist of a couple of old potato bags. "Money is all we want."

Two villainous looking tramps advanced toward William and the professor. They saw Pete and John getting down from the rear of the wagon, and more of the ragged men surrounded them. Then, from the rear, where the second man with the gun had gone, came a hail:

"Say, Josh, dere ain't no one in dis wagon."

"All right, see wot's in it," was the tramp leader's order.

The professor was pale with rage or fright. With his arms held over his head, an example which William had to follow, he awaited the search which the two tramps were advancing to perform. William knew that the professor must have considerable money about him, as business had been good.

But, just as the two dirty, ragged men were about to go through the clothes of the medicine man and William, something happened.

From the muzzle of the mortar, which stuck up through the top of the prophet's wagon, a black object shot into the air. It was accompanied by a sort of coughing, sighing sound, which, as the boys afterward learned, was the effect of releasing compressed air.

The black object went up about thirty feet, described a graceful curve, and started to come down. But, just as it got overhead of the crowd of tramps that had surrounded William and the professor, there was a tremendous explosion. The boys felt a strong wind blowing them, and they swayed, as if they were going to

topple over. The horses, too, started, but did not attempt to run away.

Not so the tramps, however. No sooner had the echoes of the report begun to die away than the leader, throwing his revolver to one side yelled:

"Come on! De're firin' cannon balls at us! We've tackled de wrong bunch! Quick, or de cops'll be after us in jig time! Run everybody!"

A moment later, not a tramp was to be seen, for they dove through the underbrush, and, from the crackling that sounded, the boys knew that the members of the road fraternity were running through the forest.

"They—they've gone!" gasped the professor, as if hardly able to believe it.

"That's right," agreed William. "But—but what happened? What was that explosion?"

"I rather think it was my friend Duodecimo Donaldby," replied the professor. "He fired in the nick of time."

"Are you—are you hurt?" gasped John, as he and Pete came running up from behind the medicine wagon.

"Not a bit," replied William. "Wasn't it lucky?"

"It sure was," agreed Pete. "Who did it?"

"I did," replied the long-haired weather prophet, as he emerged from his wagon. "I fired one of my smallest rain-producing shells, but I only turned on enough compressed air, so that it would go up a little ways, and come down right over their heads."

"Did—did you kill 'em?" asked William.

"No. The shell is only made of tough paper, and,

when it explodes, there is nothing left but dust. It frightened them off, though."

"I should say it did," remarked the professor. "How did you think to do it?"

"Why I happened to see them coming," replied the prophet. "I made up my mind that was the only thing to do. I shut myself up in the mortar room, and, looked out of the peep hole. When I saw them coming for you and William, I let her go. Say, but they did run, didn't they?"

"Like a lot of chickens when the rooster sees a hawk," said John.

"I can't tell you how much obliged I am to you," said the professor to his friend. "They might have taken all my money, and I have quite a large sum."

"That's nothing," remarked the prophet, as though he had just done the most ordinary thing in the world. "I'm glad I happened to think of it. I only hope my shot doesn't bring rain, though."

"Can you do it with one shot?" asked Pete.

"Sometimes. But I didn't send this one up very high. You see I have an arrangement in the mortar, so I can regulate the height to which I send my rain-making bombs. By increasing the air pressure they go higher. I compress my air by a small gasoline engine. But this is the first time I ever used my apparatus to scare off highwaymen."

"And I hope it will be the last," observed Mr. Clatter. "I am so frightened that I have lost all my appetite."

"Well, let's hurry on, before they find out that the

shot was only a harmless one," suggested the prophet. "They may take a notion to come back."

"That's so," agreed the professor. "It's a good thing the horses didn't bolt."

"Mine is used to the firing of the mortar," said Mr. Donaldby.

"And mine is too sensible to move unless I give him the word," went on Mr. Clatter. "Now, boys, get in, and we'll hurry on to Pokeville."

They reached the town early that evening, and, finding a secluded place, had their supper. Mr. Donaldby made inquiries to learn if there was any chance of doing any business in the rainmaking line, but was told that there was not, as the surrounding country had been pretty well drenched in the last week.

"Never mind," consoled the professor. "You'll be sure to strike a dry place sooner or later. In the meanwhile, stay with us. You did me and the boys a good turn, and we'll look after you. We may want you to scare away some more robbers."

"Well, if you put it that way, I'll remain," agreed the weather prophet, as he tried to polish his shabby tile, "but I like to add my share to the traveling expenses."

He had been living on the bounty of Mr. Clatter for the last few days.

The soap and medicine vender went to the town authorities to get his license, and, returning, drove the wagon to a busy street corner. There, the glare of the gasoline lamps, the singing of the boys, the twanging of the banjo and the professor's loud voice, soon

attracted a crowd. He began to sell his soap and Pain Preventative, and was doing a good trade. Then he began to distribute the papers for persons to make impressions of their hands, as he saw interest lagging, and he wanted to keep it up, as well as to try to discover some clues to the robber.

The boys collected the slips of paper, and eagerly examined them as they passed them to Mr. Clatter. None of them had the impression of a hand without a thumb. The professor began to read a "fortune" from a slip.

"This person, whose name I observe is Hannibal Hokus," he said, "has a very peculiar hand. He is born to inherit wealth. In a short time he will possess a fortune. He will meet with a dark lady——"

At that moment a policeman stepped up to the platform. He motioned to the professor, who bent over to listen.

"You can't do that," said the bluecoat.

"Can't do what?"

"Tell fortunes. You'll have to come with me. It's against the law to tell fortunes here."

"But I have a license."

"Let me see it," went on the officer.

The professor pulled out the permit he had obtained from the town clerk.

"This is a license to sell soap and patent medicine," said the policeman. "You have violated the law in telling fortunes. I must arrest you at once. Come with me."

"But I——" protested Mr. Clatter.

"Now don't dispute with me!" exclaimed the officer. "I know my business. I say you've violated the law. I heard you. You are under arrest. If you attempt to make any resistance it will go hard with you."

He suddenly blew a whistle, and three other policemen hurried up.

"Come with me," said the first bluecoat to the professor. "Come along, or I'll drag you down to the jail."

"Oh, I'll not resist," said the professor calmly. "But you'll find you're making a big mistake. Will these boys have to go with me?"

"Yes, they've got to go along too. Come ahead, all of you."

"Can't we drive the wagon to the police station?" asked Mr. Clatter.

"I s'pose so," agreed the officer. "Come on, boys, we'll see that he doesn't give us the slip," and he and his fellow officers climbed up into the wagon, while the three Smith boys, hardly knowing what to make of this procedure, looked blankly on.

"Are—are we arrested?" asked John.

"That's what you are," replied the policeman. "Who'll drive this horse?"

"I will," volunteered the professor. "But I warn you that you are making a big mistake."

"All right," replied the bluecoat with a sneer. "We'll see. Go ahead," and the hapless professor had to drive his wagon, containing the boys, himself and the policemen, to the station house, while a big crowd followed.

CHAPTER XXII

SPIDER AND BATEYE

"Say," remarked William to his brothers, as they were being driven along the main street, "if we're going to be arrested we might as well have stayed in Freeport."

"No," replied John. "This won't amount to anything. I've heard the professor say he'd been arrested lots of times, but he pays a small fine, and is allowed to go. We'll come out of it all right."

"I hope so," remarked Pete. "I wonder if we'll get a chance to send word to the weather prophet? He may be worried about the professor not coming back to where the rain-making wagon is."

"We'll soon be out of this trouble," predicted John again. "It wouldn't do any good to send word to Mr. Donaldby. He can't do as much as the professor can."

"Unless he could make it pour so hard that we could escape in the confusion," said William, with a smile.

"Well, I almost wish we were back in Freeport," went on Pete. "Eh, Waggles?"

The dog barked softly, and tried to hop about in the rear compartment of the wagon, which was hard work, as there was hardly room for it, and he was not very skillful, having his broken leg to hamper him. The

injury was fast mending, however, and sometimes Waggles ventured to put a little weight on the sore paw.

"I wonder what dad would think if he could see us now," remarked William, as he looked at his brothers and himself, still attired as they were in their singing suits. "He'd laugh at us."

"And he'd laugh more if he could see this crowd," continued Pete. "They want to see us locked up, I guess."

The wagon proceeded, the professor and one policeman being on the front seat, the other officers being in the forward compartment, and the three Smith boys in the rear with Waggles.

"Here we are," announced the officer who had made the arrest. "This is the station house. Come on, get out, and we'll see what the captain has to say."

With somewhat apprehensive hearts the professor and the boys alighted, being at once surrounded by the throng, which the officers tried in vain to keep back.

"Oh, if poor dad saw us now," murmured William, and, though he could not know of their plight, Mr. Smith was thinking of his sons at that very moment, when they were being led into the station.

The boys' father had never ceased to worry since their strange disappearance, and, though he now understood the reason for their going away, he was, nevertheless, alarmed. While the four prisoners are being arraigned before the police captain, I will take the opportunity to tell you something that was taking place in Freeport at the same time, and which had a bearing on the things that befell our heroes.

The receipt of the boys' letter did not allay Mr. Smith's uneasiness, save in a small measure. He knew they were safe, but he had no idea where they were.

Besides this he had other worries. The police had about given up all hope of ever getting back his three thousand dollars, or arresting the thief. The loss of the money caused business troubles to multiply for Mr. Smith. As he had told his sons, he owed a considerable sum, which he hoped to be able to pay from the sale of his land. That money, not being available, he had to consider other means. But he could find none, and, the very night of the arrest of the Smith boys, he was forced to go into bankruptcy, and arrange to sell his store at auction, for the benefit of his creditors. There was a prospect that he would lose all he had, for, not satisfied with taking the store, arrangements were made to sell all his other property, save a small apparently worthless piece of swamp-land.

"Well, I am almost glad the boys are not here, to see what trouble I am in," murmured Mr. Smith, as he signed the necessary papers. "I have no home for them to dwell in, and I must go to work myself to earn money to keep me. Oh, if only that three thousand dollars had not been stolen!"

But he knew there was no use in lamenting what had already happened, so, with a brave heart, he prepared to start over again, to build up his fortune.

Nor was the continued absence of the Smith boys unnoticed in Freeport. Some persons said it was a good thing, and they were glad that the lads had gone, for, they said, they were always getting into mischief,

which was not strictly true. Members of the Board of Trade, who had in charge the matter of trying to induce the railroad to come to Freeport, were especially bitter against the boys. Some of the more hot-headed members, such as those who had advocated tarring and feathering, openly expressed the wish that the boys would never come back.

"I hope they have a hard time, and that it will be a lesson to them," said Jonathan Peterby, one of the most vindictive. "They have practically ruined the town. I hope they never come back to it."

For it seemed that all efforts to get the railroad to come to Freeport would be unavailing. Committee after committee was sent to see those in authority, but it was reported that all depended on Mr. Stanton, the surveyor, whose tent the boys had wrecked with the hand car. Mr. Stanton had reported to his superiors that it would be best for the line to go to Vandalia, and his superiors, trusting to his judgment, would make no change, in response to the numerous petitions from Freeport.

"Mr. Stanton had good reasons for desiring to make the road touch Vandalia," said the president of the company, "and we see no reason to change his plans."

"But if we could only see Mr. Stanton," said Mr. Peterby, "we could explain matters. We could tell him how sorry we are that those Smith boys made so much trouble, and how we will make certain that such a thing will never happen again. We are also ready to subscribe a sum for a new depot."

"I am sorry, gentlemen," said the president, "but we do not feel at liberty to change Mr. Stanton's plans. He

has gone away for his health—to Mexico—and it will be some time before he will return. His nerves were much shattered by the accident which, I understand, some boys of your town caused.”

“We don’t consider those boys residents of our town,” said Mr. Peterby hastily. “They have gone away, and we hope they will never come back.”

“Ah, but they may come back,” said the president with a smile, and the committee could not admit but that this was true. “And they might do some other damage to our line, if it went to Freeport,” continued the president. “No, I think we shall go to Vandalia,” and nothing the Board of Trade could say would make him change his mind. So the Board of Trade continued to dislike the Smith boys more than ever.

But if the majority of the grown-up population of the town was glad that the Smith boys had disappeared, there were at least two minor citizens who were not. They were Bateye Jones and Doc Lutken.

“Say, ain’t it a shame they don’t come back,” remarked Doc to Bateye, one day. “There’s no fun since they left.”

“That’s right,” admitted Doc. “It’s partly my fault, too; I shouldn’t have believed Spider Langdon.”

“Well, you didn’t know he was stringing you.”

“No, but I do now, and I’d like to get even with him.”

“So would I; and Beantoe Pudder too. Did you hear how they sneaked up, and watched John, Bill and Pete go away?”

“Yep. It was a mean trick all right. But maybe we’ll get a chance to get even with ’em.”

"I wish we would."

The two friends of the Smith boys strolled down the main street of Freeport. It was getting dusk, and it was the same evening that Mr. Smith's difficulties forced him into bankruptcy, and also the same evening where, in far-off Pokeville, our heroes were being arrested.

"Say," suddenly exclaimed Bateye, "ain't that Spider just ahead of us?"

"You've got better eyes than I have; you ought to be able to tell," replied Doc.

"It is him," said Bateye very positively. "Say, let's cut through Snedicker's alley, and head him off. He's going home."

"What'll we do that for?"

"We'll give him a good thrashing for making up that fake story about the tar and feathers. I want to punch him good."

"It seems sort of mean for us two to tackle him alone."

"That's the only way we'll ever catch him. He always keeps out of our way. I'll attend to him alone, though. You can just come and look on."

"Well, I ought to lick him. It was me he told the yarn to."

"No, let me tackle him. I owe him something on account."

"What for?"

"Oh, the last time I was in swimming he tied all my clothes in knots. I'll get square with him now."

"All right. Come on, I'll go with you."

Harry and Windsor hurried through the alley, and managed to come out on a rather lonely street, just a

little ahead of Spider. He was sauntering along, all unconscious of what was in store for him, when he espied Doc and Bateye. He started, and was about to turn back, but they ran toward him.

"Hold on there, Spider!" called Bateye.

"Whatchu want?" demanded the long-legged youth.

"We want to talk to you," added Harry.

"Well, speak quick; I'm in a hurry."

Spider was trying to edge past his enemies, but they saw the move, and spread out to prevent it.

"I s'pose you thought you did a smart trick when you made Doc send the Smith boys away," began Bateye.

"Well, they went all right," replied Spider with a grin. "Guess they won't bother me any more."

"Don't be too sure," said Doc. "They're coming back."

Spider started at this. Of course Harry was only speaking in general terms, for it might reasonably be expected that the Smith lads would come home some time.

"Hu! I don't care," was what Spider said, after a pause, during which we was vainly looking about for a means of escape.

"Maybe you will after I get through with you," remarked Bateye, taking off his coat.

"What—what you goin' to do?" asked Spider faintly.

"I'm going to wallop you good and proper!" exclaimed Bateye. "Here, Doc, hold my coat."

"I—I didn't do nothin' to you," whined Spider.

"You didn't eh? You didn't tie my clothes up in knots, did you? Eh?"

"Well—well—Beantoe helped."

"I'll attend to Beantoe later. I've got you where I want you."

"Aw, yes, you had to wait until you had Doc with you. You dasen't tackle me alone," sneered Spider.

"I don't, eh?" exclaimed the lad who could see in the dark. "Well, you just watch me."

He advanced toward Spider, who, seeing there was no escape, began to whimper.

"Now—now you lemme be!" he whined.

"I will, in a few minutes—after I've given you something to remind you that it ain't safe to tie knots in my clothes, nor play tricks on my friends."

"Now—you lemme be!" cried Spider again. "I—I won't never touch your clothes ag'in."

"I guess you won't!" said Bateye. "Here! Where you running to?"

Spider had made a dive to get through an opening he saw between Harry and the side of a building. But he was not quite quick enough. Bateye sprang forward, and grasped him by the coat. Spider turned and struck at Windsor. His fist landed on Bateye's chest.

"That's better!" exclaimed Bateye fervently, as he nerved himself for the battle. "I don't like to lick a feller who won't fight back. Look out now, Spider, I'm going to finish you up good and proper!"

Another second and they were at it hammer and tongs, while Doc Lutken looked joyfully on. He only wished he was in the place of Bateye, administering a well deserved drubbing to Spider.

But Spider got all that was coming to him. He was a

strong, healthy lad, and no amateur with his fists, but Bateye, burning with righteous wrath, sailed in, and, when Spider turned and ignominiously ran to escape further punishment, his antagonist was satisfied that he had accomplished what he had set out to do.

"There," remarked Bateye, with a sigh of contentment, as he took his coat from Harry, "I guess he'll remember that."

"You certainly did put it all over him. Did he hit you much?"

"Naw; only a couple of times. Love taps. But I feel better now."

"So do I. Guess he won't be up to any more tricks right away. Come on, and I'll blow you to ice cream soda."

"That's the stuff. I'm a bit warm," and the two chums, very well satisfied with themselves, turned back to the main part of town, while Spider, nursing his wrath and bruises at the same time, kept on home, vowing vengeance.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PROFESSOR IN JAIL

The four prisoners were taken before the police captain. He heard the story told by the officer who had made the arrest, and, when the professor explained that he had taken out a license to vend his wares, the captain said:

"That may be, but there is a special law in this town against any exhibitions of fortune telling, palmistry, or the like. You could not get a license for that."

"That was due to my ignorance," admitted Mr. Clatter. "But I am willing to stop that part of my performance."

"It is too late," declared the police official. "You will have to appear before the judge in the morning. In the meantime I must lock you up."

"Cant' I get bail?" asked the professor.

"Do you know any one in town who would go your security? I must have real estate bail in your case."

"No, I dont' know any one here, but I can put up the cash."

"How much?"

"At least five hundred dollars."

"That is not enough. I will require a thousand. The city authorities wish to discourage such fakes as fortune telling."

"But I have an object in it."

"No doubt. No, you will have to be locked up."

"If I gave you five hundred dollars cash, and left my horse and wagon as additional security, would that do?"

"No."

The police captain seemed very stern.

"Then," said the professor with a smile, "I guess I will have to go to jail. It will not be the first time, but I shall be released in the morning."

"Don't be too sure," exclaimed the captain.

"Are these boys under arrest, also?" asked the professor.

"No, there is no charge against them. They only sang, I understand, and you had a license for that. You are the only one at fault, and I must lock you up."

"Then, boys, you can go," said Mr. Clatter, who did not seem much cast-down over his plight. John and his two brothers looked much relieved.

"Shall we drive the wagon back to where Mr. Donaldby is?" asked Pete.

"I wish you would. You can stay there all night. Ask Mr. Donaldby to come to court in the morning. He may be able to be of service to me. And, boys, don't worry. A public character, such as I am, is often misunderstood, and subject to mistreatment. It will all come out right."

"Yes; you're a fine public character," declared the police captain with a sneer. "I'd like a dozen such as you. I'm going to clean up this town of fakers, and I've begun on you."

"All right, captain," answered Mr. Clatter, good-

naturedly. "We'll see what the judge says in the morning."

The boys could not help feeling sorry for their acquaintance, who, in spite of his ways, had been a good friend to them. They saw him led away by the officers, and then John started from the police station, followed by his brothers.

"Don't you lads try any of that fortune telling business around here," warned the captain, as they left. "You'll find it isn't healthy."

Outside the police station they found a large throng surrounding the wagon. They pushed their way through it, and, with Waggles safe in the forward compartment of the vehicle, the three lads got up on the seat. They soon distanced the throng, and, a little later, were on the outskirts of the place, where the weather prophet's wagon was. Mr. Donaldby was somewhat alarmed by their long stay, and he was more than surprised when told what had happened.

"Of course I'll go to court in the morning," said the rain-maker. "But I'm afraid they'll fine the professor quite heavily. He has no defense."

And that was what happened. The judge heard the case, the evidence being all against Mr. Clatter. He was convicted and sentenced to pay a fine of two hundred dollars, for, as the captain had said, there was a strict ordinance against anything like fortune telling in the town. The professor's plea, that he was seeking trace of a certain man, by means of hand prints, was not accepted.

"Will you pay the fine, or go to jail?" asked the judge.

"I'll pay the fine," replied the professor, "though it comes very hard for me. If you will allow me to go to my wagon, I'll get the money."

The judge nodded his permission, and, with a policeman on either side of him, Mr. Clatter walked out to the gaudily painted vehicle, which the Smith boys, in accordance with his instructions the night before, had driven up outside the police-station.

"This will make quite a hole in the money we have taken in during the last few days," said the professor, as he began to open a small safe he had in the wagon. "But we'll make some more, boys. Anyway, you shall have what I promised you."

He opened the iron box, reached his hand in, and then a blank look came over his face.

"I've been robbed!" he exclaimed.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed one of the policemen. "That's a good bluff!"

"A bluff!" repeated the professor. "I tell you I had over five hundred dollars in this safe! Now it's gone!"

"That's a good joke," added the other policeman. "But it won't work here."

"Won't work?" asked the professor, his usually red face now quite pale.

"No, it won't work. You thought you'd get a chance to escape, but you can't do it. Now come on back to the judge, and he'll sentence you to jail!"

"One moment!" exclaimed the professor so earnestly,

that the officers hesitated. "Allow me to make a little further search."

They watched him closely while he took everything out of the safe, and looked all about the wagon.

"The money was certainly there when I was arrested," said Mr. Clatter. "There was over five hundred dollars in bills. I put them in myself, and locked the safe."

"Maybe some of these lads took it out for safe keeping," said one of the policemen, with a jeer.

Mr. Clatter glanced sharply at the Smith boys. In spite of themselves they could not but feel that they might be considered guilty. They knew the money was in the safe, and it had been in their possession all night. But a moment later Mr. Clatter's words reassured them.

"The boys couldn't have taken the money," he said.

"Why not?" asked the officer.

"Because the safe was locked. It fastens in a peculiar manner, and they do not know the secret. Only a special key will open it, and I can see that the lock has been tampered with."

"Then who did take it?" asked the taller of the two officers, who was keeping a close watch on the professor.

"That I don't know," was Mr. Clatter's reply.

"Maybe the other faker, who's alongside there got it," suggested the officer who had made the arrest.

"What? Duodecimo Donaldby?" cried the professor.

"I would as soon suspect one of you."

"Well, if you can't pay the fine, it's the jail for yours," said the tall officer with a sneer. "Come on back before the judge."

The professor, who plainly showed his confusion at being robbed, was holding a bundle of papers which he had taken from the safe when he made his search for the money. Idly he turned them over. As he did so so he uttered an exclamation.

“What’s the matter? Did you just happen to think that you left the cash home in the chicken coop?” asked one of the officers with a laugh.

Mr. Clatter did not answer. Instead he held out to John and his brothers, the bundle of papers.

There, on the white surface of the top one was a black mark. And it was the mark of a man’s palm.

“The thumbless man!” exclaimed Mr. Clatter. “He has taken my five hundred dollars! See!”

And he pointed to the imprint of a left hand with the thumb missing—a clue left by the daring thief.

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW PARTNERSHIP

For a few moments the surprising discovery held them all dumb. The boys, the professor and the weather prophet stared at the imprint of the thumbless hand. Even the police officers seemed impressed.

"How could he get the money from the safe? Where did he get a chance to come so near the wagon?" asked John in bewilderment.

The professor thought for a moment.

"I think I have it," he said. "Our man was one of that gang of tramps who held us up."

"But I didn't notice him," objected William. "I think I would have noticed him if he had been there."

"No," said Mr. Clatter. "More than likely you would not. If he was with the tramps, which I strongly suspect, he was so disguised, or had so altered his appearance that you would not know him."

"But how could he get into the wagon without us seeing him?" asked Pete. "None of the tramps came in. The bomb went off too quick for them."

"They were crowded around my wagon," said the professor. "We were so excited that we didn't notice closely. The safe stands near a window in the side, as you can see. All the thumbless man would have to do would be to put his hand in, open the safe, and take out

the money. In so doing he left his mark on this bundle of papers."

"But he must have had ink or something to make his hand black, said John.

"Soot from a fire they built in the woods," said Mr. Clatter. "His hand was grimy from that."

"But if the safe was locked," added Pete. How could——"

"It wasn't locked!" exclaimed the professor quickly. "I remember now. I had left it unlocked for I intended to get some money out to pay for the license in Pokeville. I took out enough money for that, leaving the rest in plain sight, and I didn't lock the safe, as I had some papers I wanted to put in, after I had shown them to Mr. Donaldby. Then after I had shown them to him I forgot to lock the safe. I remember plainly now. My strong box, with all my money in was open when the tramps halted us, and this thumbless man slipped up, reached in through the window and took the bills.

"After the hold-up," went on the professor, "I locked the safe in a hurry, and I was so anxious to get away from that vicinity, that I never thought to look for my money. I had no occasion to unlock my safe until just now, as I had enough cash in my pocket to pay for the license. Then came my arrest."

It was plain enough now, how it had happened, after the professor had explained. The boys looked worried, but they were glad they had been cleared of the faintest suspicion.

"Well, if you're done talking, we'll take you back to the judge," said one of the policemen. "He can't sit

there all day, waiting for you to come back with your fine. You haven't got the money; have you?"

"No," said the professor sadly, "I haven't."

"And you don't know where to get it?"

"No—not now."

"Didn't you take in some last night?" asked the weather prophet, who seemed much worried over the plight of his friend.

"Some, yes. About thirty dollars," replied Mr. Clatter. "I have it here," and he took some bills from his pocket. "I don't suppose the judge would accept this on account, and allow me to go out and earn the rest; would he?" he asked the officer.

"You'd better ask him," replied one, with a sneer. "Come on, we can't stand here all day."

"Well, I suppose there is no hope for it," remarked the professor despondently. All his gay manner was gone. His gaudy clothes seemed to be of the hues of funeral garments, and the red and black vest might as well have been a sober gray.

"Haven't you any—any friends who would lend you the money?" asked John.

"Not a soul," replied the professor. "You and Mr. Donaldby are the only friends I have, and you know your own resources. I guess I'll have to work out my fine in jail."

"What will you do with your horse and wagon?" asked Pete.

"I'll take care of that," replied Mr. Donaldby. "I can put it in a stable kept by a friend of mine. He can use the horse to pay for the board."

"Poor Pactolus," murmured the professor, looking at his sleek steed. "You are far enough off from the golden river now. I wish you could go off by yourself and find it for me. Then you could bring me back the money to pay my fine. But there, the time will soon pass, and I shall be free again, and able to give to the long suffering public my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent, that will remove spots from linen silk, cotton, wool or mixed goods. I see you have a spot on your coat," he added, turning to one of the policemen, "if you will allow me to apply a bit of my Spotless Saponifier I will, in a trice, remove it."

It was a return of the professor's old manner. He seemed to brighten up.

"Now don't get gay," advised the officer. "You come back to court with me, and take your own medicine."

"I am sorry for you boys," went on Mr. Clatter. "I hoped to be able to keep you with me all summer. As it is, we will have to part. But, there, I can pay you a week's salary, at any rate."

He held out three five dollar bills to John.

"Take it with my blessing," he said with a smile. "If you would also care for some of the Preventative, or the Saponifier or the Resolvent, why, help yourselves. I advise you to go home. I am sorry to have dragged you into this."

"We don't want that money," said John. "You keep it to buy yourself something while in jail."

"Tut-tut!" exclaimed to professor. "I will not need it. I will only be jail a few months at most, and I can

earn more money. But I regret this misadventure. Duodecimo, my good friend, if you will kindly drive the wagon around to a livery stable, and arrange to have Pactolus work for his board, at the same time mentioning that, someday, he may walk into a river that will change everything to gold, I will be exceedingly obliged to you."

"Say, he's crazy," remarked one policeman to the other. "What's he mean about a horse walking into a golden river."

"You can search me," answered his comrade earnestly. "Come on here, professor, the judge wants you."

"Directly," answered Mr. Clatter. "Good-bye, boys."

"Say," suddenly remarked William, who had apparently been struggling with some idea during the last few minutes, "I've got a scheme."

"What is it?" asked Pete quickly.

"Why couldn't we take the professor's wagon, and continue the business?" inquired William. "If Mr. Donaldby would go along with us, I think we could manage it. We know how to sell the stuff, and we could sing, and draw a crowd. What do you say, fellows?"

He had addressed himself to his brothers, but it was the professor who answered.

"Good! The very thing!" he cried. "I thought of it, but I did not like to mention it. Of course you can do it. You will, perhaps, not be able to sell as much as I do, but you can do well I am sure. Take my outfit, travel about the country, and—and——"

"We'll try to make enough to pay your fine," finished

John. "It's a good plan, Bill, and we'll do it, if Mr. Donaldby will help us."

"Of course I will," answered the weather phophet. "I can travel with you, and perhaps I may find a community suffering for lack of rain. If we do I can add to the treasury."

"Then," said the professor joyfully, "I shall not worry any more. Here, take all this money," and he thrust the remainder of the thirty dollars into John's hand. "I'll not need it in jail. The town will have to support me. Ah! I am a thousand years younger. Mercurio, do you attend well to my young friends. Set out the magic table for them. Guard them well. Ha! This is a happy turn to affairs. Pactolus, once more you will be on the road, searching for the golden river. Waggles—Ah, I must get a better name for that dog—Waggles, be kind to Scratch. Now boys, away with you. I shall await your return with the golden key that will release me from this dungeon. Duodecimo, you will help my young friends; will you not?"

"Of course, Theophilus."

"Thanks. Now then, guards, lead me to the darkest cell in yonder castle! It will be bright with hope!"

"Say," drawled one of the officers, "are there many more like this where you come from? If there are, I don't want to see 'em."

"I am the only one," replied the professor with a bow.

"Do you want us to travel any particular route?" asked John.

"You will find a route all mapped out in the safe,"

said Mr. Clatter, waving his hand toward the wagon. "Follow that. Mr. Donaldby will advise you. And now, good luck! I know you will succeed. Write to me occasionally, and—and if you can find that man without a thumb——"

"We'll not let him get away!" exclaimed Pete.

They had a double motive now in seeking for the mysterious thief.

"You will find food enough for man and beast, in the chariot to last a week or more," went on the professor. "Use your own judgment. Do the best you can, and now—farewell—a long farewell."

He waved his hand gaily to the boys, but there was an air of dejection about him, in spite of his gay words.

The policemen led him back to the courtroom. The boys lingered only long enough to hear their gaudy but true-hearted friend sentenced to two months in jail, and then, mounting to the wagon, they drove off with Waggles, while the weather prophet followed in the rear with his rain-making wagon, and a curious crowd ran along in the streets.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DROUTH

"Say," remarked Wiliam to his brothers, who were on the seat with him, "things are certainly happening to us."

"They've been happening ever since that hand car ran away," added John. "By the way, we ought to write dad another letter. Let's tell him something of what we're doing."

"We ought to let him know where he can find us," said Pete. "Maybe he'd like to write us a letter. I certainly would like to hear from him."

"So would I," spoke John, "but if we're traveling around the country I don't see how we can get letters."

"Unless we know when we're going to be in a certain town and could tell him to write on ahead," said William.

"We're never sure where we're going to be," objected John. "I guess dad's all right."

If they had only known what was going on at Freeport, how soon would they have returned! But they did not know, and they were destined to have many adventures yet, which never would have occurred but for their thoughtlessness in setting that hand car going.

They drove on, and the crowd which was following the two wagons, growing tired, and seeing that nothing

unusual was likely to happen, began to disperse. The travelers came to a halt under a clump of trees, on a quiet road in the suburbs of the town.

"Well, Mr. Donaldby, what do you think we had better do first?" asked John. "Shall we stay here or push on? We are pretty well known here, and we might draw big crowds. Besides we might have a chance to capture the thumbless man."

"I think we had better go to the next town that is on the professor's list," replied the weather prophet. "It is true that our advent here has been pretty well advertised, but I am afraid the police will make trouble for us. Besides, I can not exercise my profession here. They don't need rain."

"But wouldn't we have a good chance to capture the thief?" asked William. "He can't be very far away if he's with that gang of tramps."

"I don't believe he's there now," said the prophet. "He and they, very likely, have fled to some other part of the country. You are just as likely to find them in the next town, as here."

"That thumbless man seems to have a grudge against us," observed Pete. "He appears to be following us."

"Maybe we're following him," remarked John. "But there's one thing we can't do."

"What?" inquired Pete.

"We can't try that palmistry scheme. We'll be liable to arrest if we do."

"That's so," agreed William. "We'll have to wait until the professor gets out of jail, and then he can tell, in each town we get to, whether it will be safe."

"Not only that, but we don't know how to tell fortunes," said John.

"Oh, I could manage that part," replied the prophet with a smile. "I used to be in partnership with the professor. It is not difficult. A little knowledge of human nature is all that is required, and human nature is the same the world over. We may try the palmistry game if we find it safe, though I don't take much stock in it to locate the thief."

Neither did the boys, but it gave them something to work on, slender as the clue was.

They had dinner together beside the two wagons, Waggles and Scratch eating off the same plate, such good friends were they now. The two horses munched the roadside grass, and drank their fill from a little brook.

"Batterby is the next town," announced John, as he looked at the list the professor had made. "That's five miles away. Shall we start, and work that to-night?"

"Might as well," agreed Pete. "Let's see how we make out at selling the Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative and the other things."

"Who'll play the banjo for us to sing?" asked William.

"I will," answered the prophet. "I am almost as good a player as the professor."

And so he proved that evening, when the gasoline torches were lighted, and the little performance begun. The boys sang well, and quite a crowd of the citizens of Batterby collected. The boys did a fairly good business, though they could not keep up the running fire

of talk, as could the professor. However the prophet produced a diversion by doing some slight of hand tricks, which caught the fancy of the throng, and when business was over the boys found they had taken in seventeen dollars, which was about half of the usual night's business for Mr. Clatter.

"Not so bad," observed John, as they put the money in the safe, the secret of which had been entrusted to them by the professor.

"No, but it will take us nearly the two months to make two hundred dollars clear at this rate," said Pete.

"Maybe we'll do better after a while," suggested William.

"Let us hope so," rejoined John.

They traveled on the next morning, working a small town during the afternoon, and reaching a large one at night, where trade was good. There, learning that there was no ordinance against palmistry, the weather prophet tried his hand at telling fortunes. Many of the blackened slips of paper were handed in by the crowd, but all the palms showed impressions of thumbs, none being missing.

"I hardly think the thief will be rash enough to have his fortune told, even if he does venture to gather in the crowd about the wagon," said Mr. Donaldby as they went into camp that night.

For a week or more the new partners traveled together, doing a fairly good business. The boys wrote a letter to their father telling him something of their adventures, but giving him no address where he could

reach them. They also communicated with Mr. Clatter in the jail, assuring him of their success.

"I only wish I could get a chance to bring rain," said the weather prophet one hot day, as they were traveling along a country road. "I could earn at least a hundred dollars that way, and it would be half of my former partner's fine. But they seem to have plenty of moisture everywhere we go."

"I was just noticing that it seems to be getting a little dryer in this locality," observed John. "By the dust in the road they don't seem to have had rain here in a month."

"I believe you're right," said Mr. Donaldby. "It is quite dry here. Perhaps I may get a chance to use my apparatus. Let's hurry on to town. What is the name of the next place?"

"Coleton," answered William, after a look at the list the professor had left. "It's the centre of quite a farming community," he added, for Mr. Clatter made notes concerning each town he expected to reach.

"That will just suit," declared the prophet.

They reached Coleton that afternoon, and the first question Mr. Donaldby asked was:

"Has it been dry here?"

"Dry?" repeated an old man in front of the postoffice. "Say, stranger if it was any worse we'd blow away, sure. We haven't had any rain in nigh onto six weeks, and what crops is left ain't wuth shucks."

"Would rain now, help you any?" asked the prophet.

"Would it? Say, stranger, don't aggravate us. We've been lookin' fer rain clouds so long that half of

us is cross-eyed, and the rest of us is squintin'. Rain? I'd give a ten dollar note right now for even a good sized shower. My corn is all burned up, my potatoes ain't growin', an' my beans is nowhere."

"At last," murmured Mr. Donaldby, "I seem to have struck the right place. Friends," he continued, addressing the throng in front of the postoffice, "allow me to inform you that, if you wish, you may have rain within twenty-four hours, and the drouth will be broken."

"What's that, stranger?" said the man who had complained about dry weather. "Say it ag'in, an' say it slow, please."

"I repeat that I can bring rain for you within twenty-four hours," declared Mr. Donaldby.

"Who are you?" asked several.

"Duodecimo Donaldby, at your service," replied the prophet with a low bow. "I am a student of the weather, and I am able, with the aid of the latest scientific apparatus, to produce rain when I wish. If you desire it, and will pay my price, I will cause it to rain."

"What's your price, Mr. Donaldby?" inquired the postmaster.

"Two hundred dollars," was the answer. "It may sound high, but——"

"Say, stranger!" exclaimed the man who had first spoken, "you make it rain, and we'll pay you the two hundred dollars all right. Won't we, neighbors?"

"That's what we will!" came the fervent answer, as the throng crowded about the weather prophet.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DELUGE

"What sort of a machine you got thar, stranger?" asked one of the men.

"It makes rain, in the only scientific way that moisture can be produced," replied the prophet. "You all know how it always rains after the Fourth of July, because of the explosions, and the gases from powder in the air. The rain clouds are shattered and the rain comes down."

"It sure does," said the postmaster. "I've noticed it time and ag'in."

"That is my system," went on Mr. Donaldby. "I shoot dynamite bombs into the air, by means of my mortar; they burst, and, in a short time, it rains."

"What becomes of 'em, after you shoot 'em up?" inquired a little wizened up man.

"Becomes of what?"

"Them bombs."

"Why they are blown apart."

"Mightn't the pieces fall on us?"

"Not a bit of it. The pieces are so small you can't see 'em. Now who is in authority here? Who can I make arrangements with?"

"I am the chairman of the Selectmen," replied the man who had first spoken. "My name's Plum—Gideon

Plum. You say you want two hundred dollars for makin' it rain?"

"That's my price. You know my apparatus is quite expensive."

"Oh, that's all right. I guess it'll be wuth two hundred dollars to us to have this here drouth busted. Eh, feller citizens?"

"That's right," came the answer.

"How soon can you start in?" asked Mr. Plum.

"Right away. As soon as you decide to pay me my money."

"We ain't goin' to give you any money until you start up at least a sprinkle," said Mr. Plum.

"No, I don't expect you to. I'll begin my preparations, and all you have to do is to agree to pay the two hundred dollars when it rains."

"Oh, we'll do that all right."

Nearly all the town Selectmen were present and Gideon Plum called them in conference. It was decided that a good rain was worth all Mr. Donaldby asked for it, and, as the Selectmen knew many farmers would gladly pay a share, it was voted to let the weather prophet go ahead.

"All right," said Mr. Donaldby, when the decision was reached. "I'll just take my wagon out in the open fields, where the explosions will not frighten any horses, and start in."

"Shall we go with you?" asked Pete. "Can we help?"

"No, I don't know's you can," replied the prophet. "I'm used to working alone. I wouldn't bring the pro-

fessor's horse too close. He might get frightened, as I'm going to use pretty heavy charges, and he might run away. Better stay back here in the village. I'll go out on the outskirts."

"Do you really think you can make it rain?" asked John.

They were in the prophet's wagon then, away from the general crowd, which was gazing curiously at the two odd vehicles.

"I think so," replied Mr. Donaldby. "Let me take a look at the sky."

He peered up into the brazen heavens through a piece of smoked glass.

"There are some cirrus-cumulus formations over in the west," he murmured. "I also notice a few stratus clouds. A nimbus one would be more to my liking, but we can't always have what we want. I guess it will do."

"Can we come and watch you?" asked William.

"Yes, but keep a safe distance back. There is no telling what might happen."

The prophet made his preparations. The boys, having arranged to leave their outfit in a farmer's barn, followed the crowd on foot to the place where the bombardment of the sky was to begin. In view of the interest in the rain-making the boys had decided not to try to sell any of the patent medicine or soap.

"I'll make enough to get the professor out of jail," said Mr. Donaldby, as he drove off to the fields. "There will be no need for you boys to exert yourselves."

"Are you all ready to begin?" asked Mr. Plum, at

the head of a big throng, which had trooped out to witness the experiment.

"All ready," replied the professor.

"Now we'd like a sort of gentle rain, went on Mr. Plum. "We don't want a cloud-burst nor a water-spout. What we need is a nice, gentle, soaking shower, to last about twenty-four hours. That will just save what crops are left. But if we get a wash-out rain, it won't do us much good."

"You shall have some nice, gentle showers," promised Mr. Donaldby. "Just what you want. I'll so regulate my shots that you will have no cloud-bursts."

The crowd looked on anxiously. Rain meant a great deal to that farming community, and they had expected it so long, and had even prayed so earnestly for it, that their hopes were well nigh exhausted.

"Now you'd better stand back a little farther," said the prophet, as he appeared in the door of his big wagon.

The crowd surged back. From the vehicle could be heard the hum of the gasoline engine, as it began to operate the air pump. This went on for several minutes.

"Does it make much of a noise, young fellers?" asked Mr. Plum of the Smith brothers. "I s'pose you're sort of assistants to him?"

"Well, sort of," admitted John, not wishing to go into all the details. "Yes, it makes quite a noise," he added as he recalled the bomb that had scattered the tramps.

Suddenly there was a muffled sound, as the compressed air mortar was discharged. A small, black object shot toward the sky. Up and up it went, getting smaller every instant, until it had become but a speck.

Then came an explosion that seemed to shake the very ground. The crowd jumped, involuntarily, but the prophet's horse, which was evidently used to the noise, never stirred.

"Gosh! That ought to bring rain," murmured Mr. Plum.

"Look at that black cat!" exclaimed some one in the throng, as Scratch scrambled up on top of the wagon.

"A black cat brings good luck," observed a red haired man. "I guess it'll rain all right."

Once more came the muffled report of the air mortar, and once more the black bomb shot skyward. Then came another tremendous explosion, that made the ground tremble.

"How many's he going to send off?" asked Mr. Plum of William.

"I don't know. Maybe a dozen or more."

"Gosh! Then I'm going to git farther back," said the chairman of the Selectmen. "I'll be deaf if I stay here."

He and several others moved away. The prophet continued to shoot his bombs into the air at regular intervals. It became tiresome after an hour or so, and the crowd began to disperse.

All the afternoon the bombardment continued. Then, toward dusk, some clouds began to gather in the sky.

"By Tiddidlicums!" exclaimed Mr. Plum, "I believe he's going to make it shower!"

The clouds became blacker. The bombs continued their deafening racket.

"We'd better get the money ready," went on Mr. Plum.

"I shall fire three more shots," said the professor, "and then the ran will come. Those who have no umbrellas had better start for home."

"Oh, we're willin' to git wet," declared Mr. Plum. "We ain't felt a drop of rain in so long we don't know what it means."

Three more bombs were discharged. There was a little wait. The prophet seemed very sure of what would happen. He stopped his engine, and prepared to drive his wagon to town. He had gotten as far as the main highway, the crowd following in curiosity, when a few scattering drops began to fall.

"Here she comes!" cried Mr. Plum.

"I told you so," replied the prophet. "I'll take the money now."

Mr. Plum was about to hand it over, when there came a sudden rushing, roaring sound, and a fierce wind sprang up. It grew very black, and then the very heavens seemed to open.

From the sky there poured a deluge of rain. It was as if a cloud had burst. In great drops, that seemed like hail stones, the water came down. Every one was wet through in a moment. Muddy rivulets began to form in the road. The crowd broke and ran, the Smith boys following.

Faster and faster; harder and harder came the rain. The highway was now a small brook, thick with mud. In the fields the soil could be seen to be washing away from the hills of corn and the rows of potatoes.

It rained as it had never rained before.

Duodecimo Donaldby peered from the half opened rear door of his wagon. He seemed alarmed about something.

"It's a cloud-burst! It's a water-spout!" yelled several in the crowd. They had taken refuge beneath some trees, such shelter as they afforded, however, being very slight.

"That's right!" cried Gideon Plum. "He's busted open a cloud. This will wash out what few crops we have left."

"He's spoiled everything!" exclaimed another man.

"I made it rain. I can't help it because it rains too hard," said the prophet. "It will stop soon."

He had to shout to be heard above the noise of the storm.

"Stop!" repeated Mr. Plum. "It won't stop until it's washed the whole town away! You said you'd bring some gentle showers, and you've brought a flood! A deluge!"

"I—I couldn't help it," stammered Mr. Donaldby. "I did the best I could."

"The best you could!" cried Mr. Plum. "You sent up too many bombs! You ought to have known better. You've spoiled everything!"

Harder and harder came the rain. It was like a sheet of water now. The road had disappeared from

sight. Faster than the parched ground could drink up the water, it fell. The fields were becoming lakes, and the valuable soil was being washed away from the farm and garden products.

"He's ruined everything!" shouted several.

"That's what he has," declared Mr. Plum. "He ought to pay us damages!"

"Make him!" cried the red-haired man, whose locks were plastered all about his head. "I'll arrest him. I'm constable here."

"That's right! Arrest him!" was the cry.

"And we were to pay him two hundred dollars!" said Mr. Plum. "Why he's done five hundred dollars worth of damage with his old machine."

"Arrest him, and make him pay!" was the shout again. "He's a faker!"

Duodecimo Donaldby looked troubled. He had brought more rain than he bargained for. He could not understand it. But he saw that he had an angry crowd to deal with. Whether his bombs had produced the deluge, or whether it had come as a natural effect mattered not. The farmers were worse off than during the drought.

The weather prophet did some rapid thinking. Then he quickly closed and bolted the rear door of his wagon. Next he made his way forward, and gathered up the reins. He spoke sharply to his horse.

The animal pricked up its ears. It started forward. Mr. Donaldby made a quick turn on the road that was now a brook.

"He's going to run away!" cried Mr. Plum. "Catch him! Stop him!"

The crowd saw what was happening. They rushed from under the trees, and hurried toward the wagon of the weather prophet. He whipped up his horse. The wheels spun around in the muddy water.

A moment later he was beyond pursuit, and a fiercer burst of the storm, when the rain descended so heavily that one could not see fifty feet ahead, drove the crowd back to shelter.

"He's running away," said William to his brothers.

"I guess it was the best thing he could do," observed John. "This is an angry crowd."

"And we're left alone to manage our wagon," added Pete.

"Oh, I guess we can do it," said John. "I hope they don't think we had anything to do with the rain."

Mr. Plum strode over to where the Smith brothers were standing beneath a maple tree.

"Do you know where that fake weather man has gone?" he demanded.

"No, sir," replied John.

"Because if you did," said the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, "I'd telegraph on ahead and have him arrested. A gentle shower! I wonder what he thinks a gentle shower is?" and he waded back through the mud and water to join his neighbors. Meanwhile the rain continued to pour down in a deluge.

CHAPTER XXVII

GOING IT ALONE

"Do you know what I think?" observed William to his brothers, as they stood under the tree, and watched some of the more daring of the population of Coleton wade back to town.

"What do you think?" asked John, as he moved so that a little stream which poured down among the leaves, might shift from running over his left shoulder.

"Yes, Bill is always thinking," said Pete sarcastically.

"I think the weather prophet didn't have any more to do with this rain than we did," said William.

"I believe you are more than half right," agreed John. "It was about due to arrive, and it came just as he finished his bomb shooting. But that doesn't answer the question about what we are going to do."

"There's only one thing to do, as I see it," stated Pete, as he tried to stand with both feet on a small stone, so that he might raise himself out of a puddle of water.

"What's that?" asked William.

"Well, we've got to go it alone now. We can't leave the professor's wagon here. We owe him something, and we ought to try to get the money to pay his fine."

"Good for you, Sawed-off!" exclaimed John. "We'll not go back on the professor!"

"Of course, we may get in trouble about this storm," went on Pete.

"Trouble? How?"

"Why they may think we were in partnership with Mr. Donaldby, and want us to pay for the damage. He's a regular faker when it comes to weather."

"He is," agreed William. "So is the professor, but they were both good to us. I guess Mr. Donaldby is pretty well scared. I doubt if we see him again."

"Not very likely," remarked John. "Well, what shall we do; go back to town, or stay here until it stops?"

"It doesn't look as if it would ever stop," replied Pete, trying to balance himself on the small stone. He slipped, tried to recover his balance, and, the next moment went sprawling into a big puddle of water.

"Here! Quit that!" yelled William.

"Hel—up! Blub! Glug! Ub! Um!" Pete cried.

He floundered about, sending the muddy water in a shower over his brothers.

"What you trying to do, Sawed-off?" demanded John.

"Hel—up me u—u—u—up!" cried Pete, still splashing about.

"Get up yourself! It isn't more than a foot deep," was William's answer, and at that Pete managed to find his feet. He arose, a sorry looking sight, for he was covered with yellow mud.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed John, and William joined him.

"Hu! Think it's funny, don't you?" asked Pete, as he removed a chunk of clay from his left ear. "I wish

you'd been down there. It was so slippery that every time I tried to stand up I fell down."

"You'd better go stand out in the rain and get washed off," advised William. "Your suit looks as if it was dyed yellow."

"Yes, I s'pose it's spoiled now," sighed Pete, "and the only one I have with me."

He decided that William's advice was good, so he walked from beneath the tree where the rain had a better chance at him. It did not take long for the drenching down-pour to remove most of the traces of the soil,

By that time the deluge had begun to slacken. Already most of the people had returned to town, and the boys soon followed them. On every side were signs of the ruin caused by the storm. What crops had been left by the drouth were washed from the soil.

"About the only good this did," observed John, "was to fill the rain barrels, and settle the dust."

"Dust," remarked Pete. "There won't be any dust around this section for a year."

They reached the barn where they had left the medicine wagon, paid the farmer what they had agreed to, and, dripping wet as they were, got in, called to Waggles who had remained at the farm house, and drove off.

"Maybe we ought to stay in town and try to sell some medicine," suggested William.

"Not much," replied John. "They're so mad they'd mob us. They're wetter than Mr. Stanton was when the water tank upset in his tent. Come on, we'll get as far away as we can before dark. Then we'll stop and have supper."

"And dry off," added Pete. "I'm as wet as a drowned rat without a tail."

"Why without a tail?" asked William.

"Because a rat without a tail can't swim very good, and he'd get wetter than the other kind, Bill."

"Oh," said William.

It was slow going, because of the mud from the storm, but just as it got dark they came to the outskirts of a small town. They decided not to enter, but to camp by the roadside, and they soon had the stove going, and a meal in preparation. They removed as much of their clothes as they could, and put them to dry inside the wagon.

They felt better after supper, and crawled into the bunks with a feeling of thankfulness that they had a good warm place to stay, and did not have to worry where breakfast was coming from.

"I hope this is the end of our bad luck," said Pete, as he was falling asleep.

"That wasn't bad luck—that deluge," declared John. "It was likely to happen anywhere. Now we've got a chance to show what we can do alone."

"Um," murmured Pete, for he was half asleep by that time.

A bright, clear, beautiful, summer morning greeted the Smith boys when they awoke. The only sign of the storm was in the damp, moist earth, for the rain did not seem to have been so violent here. They prepared breakfast and then drove into town, their wagon attracting the usual attention.

Following the plan of the professor, they secured a

license to sell the medicine and soap, resolving not to attempt the palmistry.

"But how are we going to draw a crowd?" asked Pete, as they were eating their dinner along a secluded highway, and discussing plans for the night.

"By singing, of course," replied John.

"But who's to play the banjo?"

"Oh, I guess I can manage a few chords," spoke William. "I got the professor to show me one day, and it's easy. Come on, we'll have a practice."

His brothers agreed, and they started in. At first William could not get the banjo in tune, but he finally succeeded, and then, strumming some chords, he and his brothers started on one of their comic songs.

"Not so bad! Not so bad!" observed John. "I guess that will fetch 'em."

"Say," drawled a voice from a nearby fence, "do you fellers know 'My Old Kentucky Home?'"

"That looks as if it might be it, right over there," said William, with a wink at his brothers, as he pointed to a white house in the distance. "Why; are you lost?"

"Naw, I mean do you know that there song by that name?" asked the speaker, who was a farm lad.

"Oh, I guess we have a speaking acquaintance with it," answered John.

"Then I wish you'd sing it. I jest love that there piece."

The boys obliged him, by giving the melody in their best style.

"My, but that's fine!" exclaimed the farm lad. "I guess I'm goin' to be a operry singist when I grow up."

As he was about six feet tall at the present moment, the boys wondered when he was going to "grow up."

"Know 'On the Banks of the Wabash'?" asked the lad; and they sang that.

"My, but you fellers kin certainly sing!" exclaimed the lad.

"Come and hear us to-night," invited John. "We're going to give an open air concert in the town square."

"Oh, I'll be thar!" said the lad. "Say, don't you fellers want some vegetables?"

"Sure," replied William, and the youth took them to a garden, not far away, where they were able to replenish their larder at no expense.

They drove into town that night with some feeling of nervousness. It was their first attempt except when under the eye of the professor or the weather prophet. They wondered if they would succeed.

They built out the platform, lighted the gasoline torches, and then retired to adorn themselves in their gaudy suits.

Quite a crowd had collected when they emerged, and they felt more timid than ever. But William twanged confidently on the banjo, and, after the first chord, his brothers joined in the song.

It was well received, and they gave another, which was followed by applause.

"I told you them there fellers could sing like Sam Hill's canary bird!" exclaimed a voice, and, looking over the crowd, the boys saw their friend, the young farmer.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," began John, who had

been chosen spokesman, "we will, with your kind permission and attention bring to your notice some of the most wonderful medicine the world has ever known. It is something to relieve human suffering—a Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative. No pain but what will yield to its marvelous powers. Now, is there any person in this audience that has a pain?"

He had started well, as nearly like the professor as he could manage it.

"Has any one a pain?" he asked. "I wish to demonstrate the value of this wonderful remedy. Who has a pain?"

"You give me a pain!" exclaimed a tall, lanky youth, and a laugh rippled through the crowd.

John turned red, and hesitated. He had an attack of stage fright, and it looked as if their first attempt would end in failure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TAKING OUT A SPOT

But William was equal to the occasion. He reached for the banjo, and twanged the strings.

"Let's sing!" he whispered to his brothers.

They began a spirited melody, and carried it through well. This put the crowd in good humor at once, and the momentary embarrassment was forgotten. When John began he was listened to, and a man who had a rheumatic twinge in his arm, consented to allow some of the pain killer to be rubbed on.

Whether it was imagination or because of the strength of the remedy, the man admitted that his pain was gone.

"That feels fine!" the sufferer exclaimed.

"I knew it would do you good," declared John, and, on the strength of this cure, he sold several bottles.

A crowd is pretty much like a flock of sheep. What one does the others do, so the boys soon were doing a brisk trade in the Pain Preventative. Then, when the throng seemed to have purchased enough of that, John began on the merits of the Spotless Saponifier, which was a cake of soap, said to remove all sorts of spots.

"This is one of the most wonderful kinds of soap ever manufactured," said the young traveling merchant.

"It will remove all sorts of spots——"

“Will it take away a sore spot?” asked a joking lad.

“It will,” replied John good-naturedly. “It will take out any kind of a spot. Now has any one a spot——?”

“I’ve got a five spot,” added another joker, holding up a five dollar bill.

“That’s just the kind of a spot I like to remove,” said John, adapting himself to the circumstances. “I will gladly take that gentleman’s five spot, and remove it so that he will never see it again. If he will kindly pass it this way, I will rub a little of this magic soap on it, and he will instantly see it disappear.”

This was turning the laugh on his annoyer, and the crowd appreciated it.

“But I will be glad to show what this soap will do,” went on John. “If any gentleman has a spot on his coat or vest I will be glad to take it off, and, to prove to you that the soap is exactly as I represent it, I will give the gentleman the same cake I use to remove his spot, so that he can take it home and give it to his wife if he has one. If not, any lady will gladly marry him for the sake of the cake of soap.”

This was the style Professor Clatter used to indulge in, and John adapted it to his purpose to good advantage. The crowd laughed, and one man, who had a big spot on the front of his vest worked his way through the throng to the front of the platform.

“Here’s a spot,” he said. “Can you take that out?”

“I surely can,” declared John. “One moment, and it will be removed forever.”

He took a cake of soap, rubbed a damp rag on it until

he had a lather, and then rubbed the lather on the spot. He rubbed away until he had quite a suds on the offending spot, and then, taking another cloth, he rubbed the soap bubbles away.

"Now we behold," he began, "that the spot has been entirely removed."

He really expected to find it gone, for it had looked like nothing but a grease spot, and he had often seen the professor take them out with the soap, which was really a good article, doing nearly all that was claimed for it.

But, to the surprise of John, and to the astonishment of his brothers, to say nothing of the indignation of the man, what had before been but a dull, black stain on the vest, was now a large spot of vivid red. The crowd took one look at it and there was a general laugh.

"Ah—er—um," mumbled John.

"Look at that!" exclaimed the man. "Look at it! Why I might just as well have daubed on a lot of red paint."

He spoke the truth. The spot was very vivid.

"I thought you was goin' to take that grease spot out?" he said.

"So I was," replied John. "I have not finished yet. I must put a little more soap on. I have changed the chemical quality of the spot. It will require another application."

He had heard the professor talk thus when some obstinate spot was not removed with one application of the Spotless Saponifier.

John made some more lather, and rubbed it on the

vest. The crowd watched him closely. So did the man who wore the vest.

"If you don't take that red spot out I'll have you arrested!" he threatened. "That's me best vest, and I've got to wear it to church."

"Oh, I'll take the spot out," promised John, confidently, but he was terribly afraid that he would fail. If he did he had it in mind to agree to buy the man a new vest, but that would mean that he would have to admit that the soap he was selling was no good, and would also mean that they could do no more business in that vicinity.

"I will soon have the spot out," he promised. "It has been there for some years, has it not?"

"Well, a matter of ten year," the man admitted.

"Of course," said John readily. "It is more difficult to remove a ten year old spot than a two year old one, or a five year old one, which my friend over there offered a short time ago."

He was talking at random—hoping that this time the spot would disappear. He made a strong lather.

"That's right!" exclaimed the youth who had praised their singing. "In course an old spot is harder than what a new one is."

The front of the man's vest was now white with lather. John was rubbing, rubbing away, hoping against hope that he would be successful this time. He put on a little more soap, and then wet the rag to wipe it off.

"S'posin' it doesn't work?" asked Pete in a whisper.

"I can't help it," replied John. "I've done the best I could. That's a fearful spot."

With a rapidly beating heart he rubbed off the mass of lather. The crowd stood on tiptoe to see the result. The man who wore the vest craned his neck to see the result. John looked fearfully down.

As he wiped away the last of the white suds he saw something that made him start.

The red spot had turned to a vivid green, and had spread over the whole front of the vest!

"Look at that!" exclaimed the man. "Would you look at that! Green! Green! Like a Poll parrot. Fust it was red, an' now it's green! Me vest is ruined! You're swindlers! Where's a policeman! I'm goin' to have you arrested! Green! Green! As green as grass on a May mornin'! Green! Fust it were red, an' now it's green! Get me a policeman, somebody!"

The crowd was in an uproar, and poor John stood on the platform, with his two brothers, not knowing what to do.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TRAINED BEAR MAN

"What can we do?" asked John in a low tone to his brothers. "This is a fearful thing to have happen."

"Offer to pay for his vest," suggested Pete.

"No, wait. I have a plan!" exclaimed William.

"You're swindlers, that's what you are!" went on the man. "Nothing but a lot of fakers! Look at me vest! Look at it! All green like a Poll parrot! I say——"

"One moment," broke in William, leaning over the edge of the platform. "The work it not completed yet."

"Not completed? Sure an' if you're goin' to make any more rainbow colors on me vest, it's me that'll be givin' you a good trouncin'. Here, hold me coat, somebody."

"One moment," again said William softly. "The experiment is not complete. That spot was a very difficult one to remove. It requires two operations. My brother did one, and I will do the other. Just stand still a moment, please."

He quickly opened a bottle of the Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent. He poured some of it on the green spot, and, as if by magic it melted away. The vest was cleaned.

For a moment no one spoke. John and Pete were too

much astonished at William's success to know what to say. The crowd looked on in pleased wonderment. The man glanced down at his vest, as if unable to believe what he had seen.

"Well I'll be jilly-pickled!" he exclaimed. "You done it all right, young feller!"

"Of course," replied William, as calmly as if the whole affair had been planned in advance. "Sometimes we find a spot that requires both treatments. I will now demonstrate to you the benefits of keeping on hand not only the Spotless Saponifier but the Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent as well," and he began on the same sort of patter the professor used, taking John's place.

William's action saved the situation, and he sold a number of bottles of the liquid, which was a sort of cleaner, only much stronger than the soap. It was intended mainly for articles of wood and metal, however, not for clothing, though it had worked well on the vest.

The boys did a good evening's business before they decided to stop, and drive away to a secluded place to spend the night.

"Say, but we were up against it there; weren't we?" asked John, as he and his brothers crawled into their bunks. "I wonder what made that spot turn red and green?"

"Probably some chemical in the soap, and also in whatever it was that made the spot," replied William.

"How'd you come to think to use the resolvent, Bill?" asked Pete.

"Oh, it sort of just came to me. I knew we had to

do something, or the crowd would have made trouble for us. The professor once told me he got stuck nearly the same way, and he tried that plan, so I thought I would. I didn't know whether it would take the spot out, or turn it purple or pink, but I had good luck."

"I should say you did," remarked John. "You have to think quick, in this business. It isn't as easy as it seems. The professor is smarter than I gave him credit for."

"I hope we can get him out jail soon," said Pete. "We will need some more stuff soon, if we sell at the rate we did to-night."

"That's so," admitted John. "I wonder where he buys his supplies. We must write and ask him."

The boys were almost asleep when William ventured a remark.

"I wonder how things are in Freeport?" he said. "Do you think the railroad is at Vandalia yet?"

"Oh, go to sleep," advised John, and soon snores from William's bunk told that he had followed this counsel.

The boys started off again the next morning. Waggles ran along beside the wagon when Pactolus, the sturdy horse did not go too fast, for the dog's broken leg was nearly healed. The weather continued pleasant, and the three brothers enjoyed their new life, though, at times, they could not help wishing they were back in Freeport.

"I wonder if we'll ever see the weather prophet again?" said Pete, as they were nearing a town where

they expected to do a good business, for it was a large place.

"Hard to tell," replied John. "I guess he hasn't stopped going yet."

"He wasn't half bad," remarked William, "though I don't believe he knew any more about the weather than I do."

Maybe he'll go into some other line of business now," said Pete.

"He certainly ought to," was John's opinion. "Say, Sawed-off," he continued, "have we got plenty to eat? You're in charge of the kitchen."

"We need some more canned stuff," replied the short Smith lad. "I never see fellows eat as you two do."

"Listen to him talk," answered William. "As if he wasn't always the first one to sit down, and the last to get up."

"Well, I chew my victuals better than you do," retorted Pete, "and it takes me longer. But say, are we making any money?"

"We've got nearly fifty dollars in the safe now," replied John, who acted as treasurer.

"Yes, and there'd be a lot more, if it wasn't for that thumbless man," said William.

"I'd like to run across him now," spoke Pete.

"Run over him, you mean," interjected William. "This wagon is heavy enough to squeeze that stolen money from his pocket."

"I wonder if he's the same fellow who robbed dad?" inquired John.

"Sure," was William's answer. "The mark of his hand on the paper in the safe, was just like the one on our wall paper at home. Oh dear! When I speak of home it makes me want to go back."

"Drop that sort of talk," advised Pete. "We'll go back this fall, when they've forgotten about us, and we'll have some money to show for our trip. Then we can have some fun when school opens."

"Maybe there won't be any school," said John.

"No school? Why?"

"Well, if those Board of Trade men are to be believed, the town will go to rack and ruin if the railroad doesn't come."

"Oh, they're just talking to hear themselves talk," declared William. "Freeport will get along all right."

"I wish we could do something to help 'em get the road there," went on John. "If only we hadn't started that hand car."

"Well, if we hadn't, we wouldn't be here today, having a good time, so what's the odds?" asked Pete. "Come on, make Pactolus move a little faster. We want to get to Benton in time for some afternoon business."

John urged the horse to a faster gait, and they covered a couple of miles of the highway. As they were coming in sight of the town of Benton, they heard, from around a bend in the road, the sound of some one singing.

"Hark!" called William. "What's that?"

It was a rollicking, gay, happy air that was borne to

them on the wind—a curious song, sung in a high-pitched, strange voice. And this is how it ran:

“La, la, la fi la did-a la!

La la! Tum tiddle dee!

Oo! la la, ze zum zut zizzium!

Da da, Oh zum zizzy zee!”

“Well, did you ever hear the like of that?” asked Pete.

“Sounds like an Egyptain snake charmer,” said William.

The song became louder. The horse pricked up its ears, and began to prance a bit.

“Steady old man,” called John soothingly.

The song ceased, and then some one, who was concealed behind the bushes called out.

“Now zen, over you go, Georgi! Zat ze way! Now, once mo’ show zem how you ride ze bici-bici! La, la, la fi la did-a la! Oo! la, la, ze zum zut zizzium!”

A moment later the boys drove around the bend, and came upon a curious sight. On the grass beside the highway was a man dressed in a suit of brilliant red, with a big black hat upon his head, and a feather that swept over his shoulder. In one hand he held a bugle, and in the other a light chain.

And, at the farther end of the chain, was an enormous black bear, which, as the boys came in sight began prancing around as if riding a bicycle, while the man hummed his curious song.

Pactolus, the horse, reared, and began to tremble as he whiffed the wild smell of bruin.

"Steady old fellow!" called John, as he took a firmer grip on the reins.

At that moment the bear uttered a growl, and started toward the wagon. The man raised his bugle to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

"Hi! Yi! Zum zizzium!" he cried.

The shout, the bugle blast, the sight of the bear and the scarlet figure of the trainer worked on the otherwise calm nerves of the horse. He plunged forward, got the bit in his teeth, and, an instant later was galloping down the road at full speed, the heavy wagon swaying and bouncing behind him, and the boys clinging to the seat for dear life.

CHAPTER XXX

NEWS OF THE THUMBLESS MAN

"Stop him! Hold him! Don't let him get away!" cried Pete.

"I don't intend to, if I can help it," panted John, pulling on the reins with all his might. "Whoa, Pactolus!" he cried. "Easy now. That bear won't hurt you! Whoa, now!"

Whether the horse understood, or whether it thought it had gotten far enough away from the danger was not made manifest, but the animal gradually slackened its speed, and came to a trot. John then brought Pactolus to a halt.

"Whew! But Pactolus can run when he takes a notion," said William. "I'm all shaken to pieces."

"And so are the things in the wagon, to judge by the noise," said John. "I'm afraid some of the bottles are smashed."

They made an examination, and found that quite a number of the bottles of the pain preventative had been broken, as well as some of the resolvent.

"That's a nice mess," observed John. "We haven't any too much of the stuff, and we can't get any more until we get the professor out of jail."

"We ought to make that bear man pay for the damage," suggested Pete.

"That's what we had," replied William. "Why, here he comes now," he added, as he looked back over the road.

"Don't let him bring that bear up here," said John quickly. "We don't want another runaway, and more stuff smashed."

"Hi there! Keep back with that bear!" shouted William, motioning with his hand to the scarlet-clad figure.

"Aw right," was the answer, and the man tied bruin to the fence, and came on rapidly.

"Me ver'y sorry bear scare yo' hoss," he said, as he took off his plumed hat, and made a bow. "Me no t'ink any one come along ze road."

"Well, you ought to do your practicing in the fields," said John, rather crossly. "You are to blame for breaking a lot of our stock."

"Me ver'y sorry," repeated the man. "Georgi, he very sorry too."

"Yes, I s'pose so," grumbled John. "Is Georgi your bear's name?"

"Yes; Georgi, he ze best bear what ever was. Me have him since he was leetle like so high," and the man indicated the dimensions of a small puppy.

"Well, I wish he'd died when he was little, then he wouldn't have scared our horse," said William. "You ought to pay damages," he added.

"Me sorry, me no money to pay. Ze people not mooch like to see trained bear. Georgi good bear, but people no like see."

"Well, I don't s'pose we can get anything if you haven't got it," said Pete.

"Yo' no have me arrest?" asked the man, somewhat sadly.

"I don't see what good that would do," replied John.

"Ah, I t'ank you. Me ver'y sorry. Me sing little song, me so glad."

"No, don't sing!" exclaimed John quickly. "The horse might run away again."

The man could not seem to understand, but he appeared grateful that the boys were not going to make trouble for him. He bowed again, with his plumed hat, and then, with a sudden motion, he took from his finger a ring, containing a large stone, that sparkled like a diamond, but which, from its size, could hardly have been that gem.

"Yo' take this?" asked the bear man, evidently making it a sort of peace offering.

"No, we don't want your fake ring," said Pete, but the man had handed it to John. No sooner had the eldest Smith boy looked at it than he exclaimed:

"Where did you get this ring?"

"Man sell it to me for diamond—but—only glass," replied the trainer, with a shrug of his shoulders. "He fool me—get my money. But jewelry man say ring part is gold. I give him to you for what trouble I make wiz ze bear."

"Boys, look here!" exclaimed John excitedly. "Don't you remember this ring?"

He held it out to his brothers.

"I sure do," replied William. "That's one that dad has had for a good many years. Or at least it's just like his."

"That's right," added Pete. "He used to let me play with it when I was a little fellow. It once had a ruby in, but when that got lost dad had this piece of crystal put in. But maybe it's not the same one."

"Yes it is," said John quickly. "It's got dad's initials in. See!" and he pointed to the engraving.

"And the ring was stolen from the desk with other trinkets when the three thousand dollars were," added William. "Fellows, we're on the track of that mysterious thief again!"

"Who gave you this ring? Where is he? Was it a man without a thumb?" asked John quickly.

"Yes. Ze man he haf no t'umb on dis hand," and the bear man indicated his left. "I meet him odder day. He say he sell me fine ring cheap. I give him nearly all my money for it. Then I find out it no good. I am swindle."

"Where is the man now?" inquired Pete.

"He no stay," replied the trainer. "He know I be after him. But I find some—what you call hobos?" and he looked inquiringly at the lads.

"He means tramps," said Pete.

"Ah, ze tramps," went on the bear man. "I see some tramps what know ze man wizout a t'umb. I ask where he be go, an' zey say he go near some railroad what run through green valley. I no can tell where that is, so I no go. I try make more money wid ze bear—wid Georgi. So I no have money to pay yo',

but I give ze ring. Ze gold worth somet'ing. Yo' say yo' know ring?"

"Yes, but never mind about that part now," spoke John quickly. "Haven't you any idea where the man without a thumb went?"

"Off to green valley," was the reply. "Me no can tell."

"That's our man, as sure as you're born!" exclaimed Pete. "He seems to be on our heels, or we on his, everywhere we go. But what in the world does he mean by the green valley?"

"I'll tell you!" exclaimed William. "He means the Green Valley railroad! The road that is being built near our place!"

"That it. Green Valley," repeated the bear man.

"That's where the thumbless man is," went on William. "He, and the gang of tramps he is with, have headed for there. There are always tramps around a railroad. He's getting rid of the trinkets he stole from dad's desk. But he didn't think we'd get a trace of him through this ring. We had better telegraph the police at once, and ask them to be on the look-out."

"And give ourselves away," objected John. "I guess we can't do it," for he and his brothers, not knowing the true state of affairs, imagined that they were liable to arrest in Freeport.

"What can we do?" asked Pete.

"We'll have to go there ourselves, and not let any one see us in Freeport," decided John.

"Then what?"

"Maybe we can catch this thumbless man, and make him give up what's left of dad's money, as well as the professor's five hundred. That's what we've got to do!"

"It doesn't sound very reasonable," remarked William, "but I guess it's the best we can do. The police are the ones who ought to attend to this case, but of course we can't let them know where we are."

"We can't go all the way back to Freeport, or near it, right away," said Pete. "We've got to stop at a lot of places on the way, and sell stuff, to get money to pay the fine and get Mr. Clatter out of jail."

"That's so," agreed John. "Well, we'll make as good time as we can. It'll take a few more weeks to raise the two hundred dollars for the fine. Then we'll bid good-bye to the professor, and take after the thumbless man.

"And by that time he'll be a thousand miles away," objected William.

"Can't help it," declared his older brother. "We can't leave the professor in the lurch."

"Yo' take ring?" asked the bear man.

"Sure, and we're much obliged to you," replied John.

"No be mad at ze bear?"

"No, we'll forgive you. The ring is worth more to us than the medicine."

"A' right. Me glad," replied the foreigner, as, once more, he made a sweeping bow with his plumed hat. Then he turned, and went back up the road to where he had tied the bear to the fence. And, as he went he sang:

“La, la, la fi la did-a la!
La, la! Tum tiddle dee!
Oo! la la, ze zum zut zizzium!
Da da, Oh! zum zizzie zee!”

“Well, did you ever hear tell of anything stranger than this?” asked John, as he gazed at the ring in his hand.

“I guess not,” replied William. “If we read it in a book we wouldn’t believe it.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PROFESSOR RELEASED

The boys talked over the matter at some length, and decided that their best plan would be to continue selling the medicine and soap, as long as their supply held out. John calculated that there was enough left after the accident caused by the runaway, to make two hundred dollars over their expenses.

"Then we'll get Mr. Clatter out of jail," he said, "and have him advise us what to do."

They drove into town, and, making their arrangements for an afternoon and evening of business, had their dinner out of doors near the wagon, which was drawn up along the highway.

Trade was good in the town, and that night they had the satisfaction of adding a number of dollars to the treasury. For a week they traveled about the country, stopping in the places indicated in the list made out by Mr. Clatter. Sometimes they had good luck, and sold a number of bottles of the medicine, and many cakes of soap. Again they would arrive at a place where some other traveling merchant had just been, and they could not dispose of enough stuff to pay expenses.

They enjoyed the free and easy life, but it would have been more enjoyable if they had known how their father was, and if they could have stopped worrying over the railroad matter.

"It seems sort of queer not to hear some of the neighbors blaming 'those Smith boys' for something; doesn't it?" said Pete one day.

"That's right," agreed William. "We haven't done any mischief since we left home."

"And we'll not do any if we ever get back," added John. "Every time anything happens in Freeport they lay it to us. I guess things are happening there now, and I wonder who they blame it on."

"Maybe Bateye and Doc," suggested Pete.

"More likely Spider and Beantoe," said William.

"I'd like to see the boys again," spoke Pete.

"Same here," put in John. "Well, maybe we will soon."

"How much money have we got now?" asked William.

"About a hundred and fifty. We'll have fifty more in a week."

"What town do we strike next?"

"Pimford. It's quite a place, but what's worrying me, is how we're going to do business much longer," went on John.

"How's that?" asked Pete.

"Well, our stock is almost gone, and we can't get any more."

The prospect indeed was not a very pleasant one, and the boys looked worried. There was nothing they could do, however.

"Let's write to the professor," suggested Pete. "He may be able to advise us what to do."

William and John thought that advice good, and they

prepared a letter to be mailed in Pimford. They reached that town in the afternoon, and stopped the wagon in front of the post office while Pete went in to mail the letter.

"Say, are you the Smith boys?" asked the man at the stamp window.

"Yes—yes—I guess so," gasped Pete. He at once had a fear that there was an alarm out for their arrest.

"Don't you know?" asked the man sharply.

"Yes—yes; we're the Smith boys," admitted Pete, wondering if he had time to make a leap for the wagon, and escape with his brothers.

"I thought so," went on the man. "Well, here's a letter I've been holding for you several days. I'm the post master here and the fellow who wrote that, enclosed it in an envelope to me, asking me to hand it to some boys who would arrive in a circus wagon. You're them, I guess."

He handed over the missive, and, at the first sight of it, Pete exclaimed:

"It's from Mr. Clatter!"

He hurried out to his brothers, and they quickly read the letter. The unfortunate professor explained that he expected the boys would arrive at Pimford about this time, so he wrote on ahead there. The letter contained some surprising news.

"I have prevailed on the judge to reduce my fine to a hundred dollars," the professor wrote, "so if you have that amount made, and I think you must have, will one of you kindly come here and effect my release. Take a

train, as it will be quicker, and keep the outfit in Pimford."

"Hurrah! That's the stuff!" cried John. "Now we stand a chance to capture the thumbless man!"

"Who'll go get the professor?" asked William.

"I will," replied John, and he, being the eldest, the two younger brothers did not dispute his right.

The next day Mr. Clatter and John arrived in Pimford. The inventor of the Pain Preventative was a little paler than when he had been forced to part company from the boys, but he had regained his usual good spirits.

"Ah, it does my heart good to see you," he said. "Now we can resume our travels again. The world will be better off than when I was in that miserable dungeon. We will start in at once to repair our shattered fortunes. I don't suppose Pactolus found the golden river; did he?"

"No," replied John.

"Ah, well, there is time enough. And how is Waggles? I positively must get a more classical name for that dog."

"He's pretty well," replied William. "His leg is all better."

"But where is Duodecimo Donaldby?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you about him," said John, and he proceeded to relate about the deluge, and the weather prophet's flight.

"Never mind, we may meet him again, in a different character," said the professor. "And now to business."

'As you have sold nothing here, we should do a good trade.'

"Not very, I'm afraid," said Pete.

"Why not?"

"We haven't much stock left."

"Ah, that is nothing," declared Mr. Clatter. "I will at once begin to make a fresh supply. And, what is more, while in jail I thought out a recipe for making a fine grade of silver polish from coal ashes. It will cost comparatively nothing, and we can sell a lot of it. Now we'll take our wagon to some secluded spot, and replenish our supply."

Which the professor at once proceeded to do. He went to a drug store and purchased a number of things, and then, with a supply of new bottles, he and the boys, establishing their plant near a convenient brook, proceeded to manufacture the resolvent, the pain preventative and the saponifier. When they had a good supply of these, the professor manufactured his new silver polish from finely sifted ashes and some other ingredients.

"Now we will start off," he said. "Fortune lies just ahead of us. We must make haste and catch her."

Matters did appear to brighten with the advent of the professor. They continued their travels about the country, and disposed of many bottles of the resolvent and pain medicine, many cakes of soap, and hundreds of boxes of the silver polish. The little safe in the wagon was again holding a bundle of bills, and the boys had fifty dollars each, being paid every week.

They continued their nightly singing act, now and

then adding some dancing, or sleight of hand work, for the professor taught them some simple tricks.

They asked Mr. Clatter what to do about the thumbless man, and he advised them to wait until they were nearer Freeport, which town they were approaching.

"If he has gone back there," said the professor, "he is doubtless sure that he will not be caught. In that case he will remain there some time. I do not believe my plan of reading palms will do any good now, so we will dispense with it. Besides, it may not be altogether safe."

"Do you think we'll ever catch him?" asked Pete.

"I hope so—yet he seems to be a slippery customer. We will hope for the best. I wish we would come across Duodecimo Donaldby. He might have met the thumbless man in his travels."

They journeyed on for a week more, business being good. The boys had written two more letters to their father, assuring him that they might soon be home.

One night, when they were in a small town, about fifty miles from Freeport, John purchased an evening paper. He had no chance to read it until after business that night, and then, just before retiring, he spread it out under a lamp in the rear room of the wagon, where he and his brothers were sitting.

"Hello! What's this?" suddenly exclaimed John, as he stared at something on the front page.

"What's the matter?" asked William.

"Listen to this news about Freeport," went on John, and he proceeded to read an account of how the Board

of Trade had made one final effort to induce the railroad to come there and not go to Vandalia. It had been useless, and there was gloom in the town where the boys lived, and corresponding elation in Vandalia. Nor was the part the Smith boys had played in the matter neglected. Their unfortunate prank was blamed for the loss the town would sustain. Then followed a sort of editorial on how much damage thoughtless boys could do, and the disadvantage they were to a community. It ended with:

"We understand on good authority that the Smith boys have gone away. Our advice to them is to stay. Freeport has no desire to see them again."

"Well, that's putting it pretty strong," said William slowly.

"But I guess we deserve it, though we didn't mean to do any harm," observed Pete.

"Of course not," added John. "But say, fellows! Listen to this. It's about dad!"

He then read, in a voice that trembled somewhat:

"We regret to announce that our fellow townsman, Mr. John Smith, has gone into bankruptcy. It is said that he has lost not only his business, but all the large tract of land he once owned. His failure was brought about by the robbery of three thousand dollars some time ago. He has our sincere regrets."

"Well—what—do—you—think — of — that?" said William slowly.

"It isn't true!" burst out Pete.

"I'm afraid it is, but I wish it wasn't," said John.

"Poor dad—failed!" went on William.

"And we not there to help him," added Pete. "Say, we never ought to have run away from home."

"I'm beginning to think so," admitted William.

"Poor dad! Poor dad," murmured Pete.

"Boys," said John quickly, "there's only one thing for us to do."

"What's that?" asked William.

"Go home at once, and do what we can for dad!"

"But the Board of Trade—they'll have us arrested!" exclaimed Pete.

"I don't believe they will," said John.

"If they don't, the railroad officers may."

"We can't help it. It's our duty to go home, and help dad in his trouble. Just to think of it, besides all his other worries, he has had to worry about us. Fellows, we must go home at once!"

"All right, Cap," agreed William. "I'm with you. When can we start?"

"We'll start to-morrow morning," decided John. "Poor dad! To think of him failing, and losing everything he had—his business, and his land."

"We'll help him get it back," said Pete bravely.

"That's what we will," declared the older brother. "Back to Freeport for ours, as soon as a train can take us!"

"What's that?" asked Professor Clatter, entering the wagon at that moment, having been outside to see to his horse. "Going back to Freeport in the morning? Why we're due in Millville then."

"We've got to go home to our father," said John.

"He's in trouble. Read that," and he handed over the paper.

The professor glanced at it. Before he had time to read it through, there came a shout from outside. A voice, which the boys seemed to recognize was calling:

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Someone's in trouble!" exclaimed the professor, as he rushed from the wagon.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE THUMBLESS MAN AGAIN

"What's the matter? Who is it? What has happened?" demanded Mr. Clatter, as he peered into the darkness.

"Help me! I've fallen into the ditch!" cried a voice. "I'm stuck in the mud, and I can't get out. Help!"

"Duodecimo Donaldby or I'm a seven-spotted stickleback!" exclaimed the professor.

"Is that you, Theophilus?" asked a faint voice. "Oh! I'm so glad I've found you!"

"Show a light, boys!" called Mr. Clatter, and William took a lantern from a hook, and flashed the gleams of it outside.

By the light of it could be seen the head and shoulders of the recent weather prophet. The remainder of his anatomy was in a slimy ditch that was not far from where the travelers had halted their wagon for the night.

"We must help him out," said Mr. Clatter. "Come on boys."

With the aid of some fence rails Mr. Donaldby was partly pried, and partly pulled, from the sticky mud that was holding him fast. He was a sorry-looking

sight, for his clothes from his waist to his shoes, were cover with muck.

"I saw the light from your wagon," he explained. "I didn't know it was you, but I hoped so. The glare blinded me, and I fell into the ditch."

"We'll soon have you all right," promised the professor. "William, just draw a pail of clean water from the spring, and wash him down. You need a scrubbing, Duodecimo. I'll—"

"Not that name," said the former prophet quickly.

"What name?"

"Duodecimo."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm no longer Duodecimo Donaldby."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Mirthrandees Hendershot."

"And your business?"

"Horse doctor."

"Ah," said the professor. "The weather——"

"I didn't dare continue in that after—er—I suppose the boys told you?"

"Yes. To bad."

"Oh, I don't know. That game was pretty well played out. There was nothing sure in it. This is better."

"But I didn't know you knew anything about doctoring horses."

"I didn't, but I got a book, and read it up. I've done pretty well. One horse I was doctoring died, but I was in the next town when it happened, and I didn't go back."

"Ah," said the professor again. "But we are keeping you out in the damp. William, have you the pail of water."

"Here it is."

"Now, Pete, if you'll get the broom, we'll wash down Mr.—er—Mr. Hendershot."

With the clean water, and a broom, the worst of the mud was removed from the lower extremity of the horse doctor. Then he entered the wagon with Mr. Clatter and the boys, and the professor supplied him with some dry clothes.

"Now tell me about yourself," invited Mr. Clatter, when the wayfarer had been given some supper.

Mirthrandees Hendershot did so, describing his wanderings since he ran away during the deluge. He had disposed of his rain-making outfit to a friend, and become a horse doctor. In turn the professor related the experiences of himself and the boys.

"And now they talk of leaving me," he said. "They were just explaining when you called for help. I will ask them to continue."

Which John did, dwelling on the necessity for himself and his brothers starting for home at once, to help their father.

"Hum. Much as I dislike to lose your services, for I value them highly," said the professor, "I must admit that you are in the right. Your place is home with your father. He needs you. Perhaps you were foolish ever to have run away, but you acted for the best, and it may turn out right, even yet."

Little did the boys know what was in store for them,

and how their escapade was to turn to their benefit, as well as to that of their father's.

"You have done me a great favor," went on Mr. Clatter, "and I want to show you that I appreciate it. I will add to what I have already paid you, enough so that you will each have a hundred dollars. With that you may be able to temporarily relieve the distress of your father. You may start for home in the morning. There is an early train that will take you to within a few miles of Freeport."

"I suppose you will continue the business?" ventured William.

"Oh, yes," replied the professor. "I will still continue to sell my Peerless Permanent Pain Preventative, my Rapid Robust Resolute Resolvent, my Spotless Saponifier and my Supremely Sterling Silver Shiner. And I have another plan. Duodecimo—I beg your pardon, I should say, Mirthrandees, does the horse doctoring business pay?"

"Not so well as it might."

"Then I have a proposition to make you. Will you once more enter partnership with me, and travel about in my chariot?"

"Theophilus, I will!" exclaimed Mr. Hendershot.

"'Tis well!" spoke the professor dramatically. "Together we will travel the dusty roads of time, toward the golden future that beckons us on. At any moment Pactolus may wade into the magical river, and turn us all into gold. Until then we will sell patent medicines, soap and silver polish. Mirthrandees, you used to be an actor, and you can resume your old calling.

In the intervals of selling soap and silver polish, you will recite extracts from Shakespear's plays."

"A good idea," said the former weather prophet and horse doctor. Nothing seemed to come amiss to him.

"Then, if all is settled let's hie ourselves to bed," went on Mr. Clatter. "Ha, Mercurio, make up the downy couches, and we will court tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep, and let it knit up the raveled sleeve of care. To bed!"

A little later the five travelers were slumbering soundly. The boys were up early, but Mr. Clatter was before them, and had a good breakfast ready.

"Mercurio has set out the magic table for you," he said. "Come and dine, or, rather break your fast. Then, away with you, and may good luck attend you."

"You seem glad to get rid of them," observed Mr. Hendershot, as he was washing his face and hands in the little brook.

"I but follow the advice of the ancients," retorted Mr. Clatter. "I do but 'welcome the coming, speed the parting guest, for, in that rule true friendship's law's expressed.' So, boys, eat heartily, and then—away."

The boys were sorry to leave the old professor, who, in spite of his faults, had been very good to them, as had the weather prophet.

"Good-bye," called the boys, as they started for the station.

"Good-bye," answered the two partners, standing at the back of the gaudy wagon.

"Come, Waggles," called John.

"Ah, that dog! I have entirely forgotten a classical name for him. 'Tis a shame that he must go through the world burdened by a title like Waggles. But it is too late now. When next we meet, I'll have a fitting appellation for him."

"I don't s'pose we'll ever see them again," said William, as he and his brothers, preceded by Waggles, turned down the road, and waved their hands at the two men.

"Oh, we may," said John. "This world isn't such a big place after all. Look how the thumbless man has followed us."

And, though it was some time before the Smith boys saw their two strange friends again, they did meet them, and under strange circumstances.

"That thumbless man!" exclaimed Pete, as they lost sight of the wagon. "I'd just like to meet him!"

They purchased tickets for Rossby, the nearest station to Freeport, and were soon journeying toward home.

"I wonder how we'll find dad?" remarked Pete.

"I hope it isn't all true — about him losing his money," said William.

"So do I," spoke John. "Still, I'm afraid there's some truth in it. My, how slow the train seems to go!"

But it was really making good speed. The boys, however, were not to reach their destination without trouble. When within half the distance of Rossby they were held up by a freight wreck on the line, and it was late afternoon before they got started again.

Then, in trying to make up some of the lost time one

of the coaches developed a "hot box." The waste in the axle box caught fire and it was impossible to go on until it had been put out, and the bearing cooled.

"Where are we?" asked Pete as they got out of their coach, and walked up and down the track, as did many other passengers, while waiting for the trouble to be remedied.

"You're about three miles from Rossby," answered a brakeman.

"And how long before we'll get in there?" asked John.

"About an hour."

"Why we could walk it in less time than that," declared Pete.

"Yes, you could," assented the railroad man. "It's a straight road, down the track."

"And if we wait here an hour we may miss a chance of getting to Freeport to-night," went on William.

"That's so," admitted John. "Let's walk."

They started off down the track. It was dark now, and, as they drew away from the vicinity of the lighted train, they saw a dim stretch of track before them.

"It's sort of lonesome," commented Pete, with a little shiver.

"That's nothing," said William. "What do we care, as long as we're going home, and have a hundred dollars——"

"Hush!" exclaimed John.

"What's the matter?"

"Some tramps might hear you, and hold us up."



"THE MAN WITHOUT A THUMB!" EXCLAIMED WILLIAM IN A
WHISPER, "THE ROBBER!"

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There are always a lot of tramps hanging around a railroad. Keep still about the money."

They plodded on in silence for perhaps a mile, and, just as they came in sight of the distant glow of Rossby, John, who was a little in advance, suddenly stopped.

"What's the matter?" asked William.

"Hush!" exclaimed his elder brother, and he pointed off to the left.

The other boys looked. They saw, in a little hollow, near the railroad embankment, a small fire blazing. And about it were grouped several men—men who, at a glance, could be seen to be tramps.

But, more strange than this was what happened immediately after that. One of the men arose, and, advancing well into the circle of light cast by the fire, addressed his companions. As he spoke, he waved his hands to and fro.

And, to the astonishment of the boys, they saw that his left hand lacked a thumb. They could see it plainly in the glare from the fire, which blazed up brightly, as one of the tramps threw some wood on it.

"The man without a thumb!" exclaimed William in a whisper. "The robber!"

"Hush!" said John softly. "Let's see if we can hear what he is saying. Now, at last, we have a chance to capture him!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

OVERHEARING A PLOT

For a few minutes the boys watched the strange scene before them. They could see the thumbless man talking earnestly to the tramps, but they could not hear what was being said.

"We've got to get closer," said John. "Let's crawl up behind that tool box," and he pointed to one standing on the edge of the railroad embankment, and not far from where the strange conference was going on.

Moving cautiously the boys made their way to it. William stepped on a big cinder, which slipped from beneath his foot, and rolled down the incline. The tramps started to their feet.

"Some one's coming!" cried the man who had put wood on the fire.

As good luck would have it, Waggles, at that moment, ran along the track. He had lingered in the rear of the boys, in the hope of catching a stray rat, and now sought to join them. He came opposite the place where the fire was, just as William made the noise. The tramps looked up and saw the animal.

"It's only a dog," said the man without a thumb on his left hand. "Some stray cur."

"Here, Waggles!" whispered John softly, and the

dog knew what the caution meant. He crawled along and joined his masters.

The three boys had instantly crouched down in the shadow of the big tool chest, the moment William slipped on the cinder, and so were not seen.

"There, it's gone," they heard the thumbless man say. "Now I'll tell you what we'll do."

"We can hear them plainly from here," whispered Pete to his brothers.

"Quiet," cautioned John.

"Yes, it was a dog, all right," remarked one of the men. "It's all right, if he didn't have some one with him."

"Oh, you're always looking for trouble, Muggsy," retorted the leader. "Why don't you get over it. You fellows would do nothing if it wasn't for me. Why I can get more money single-handed than I can by traveling with this crowd. I've a good notion to shake you."

"Aw, wasn't we with youse when we held up de medicine wagon, an' youse got five hundred plunks?" demanded the man who had mentioned the dog.

"Yes, and you all ran, when they fired a harmless bomb at you," sneered the man with maimed hand.

"Well, I took notice that you skedadled too," was one tramp's retort.

"Naturally, I had the money, but there was plenty for you fellows to get, if you'd had any nerve."

"That's the man who robbed us all right," whispered William.

"Quiet," implored John.

"Now I tell you what it is," went on the thumbless man, "if you ain't brave enough to carry this plan through, why say so right now, and we'll drop it."

"Aw, go on," answered a red-headed tramp. "We're wid youse all right. You tells us what to do, an' we'll do it."

"That's better. Now here's our program. You know the pay car will come down late to-night, to be ready to pay off the men to-morrow morning. It'll run down to the construction camp, and stay there. But if we do what's right, when it gets to the camp, there won't be any money in it."

"How's dat?" inquired a very fat tramp.

"Why, we'll hold it up just back of the deep culvert, near that hill they call the Cat's Paw."

"How youse goin' t' make it stop?" asked the fat tramp. "That pay car goes like Sam Hill."

"I know it," said the man without a thumb, "but a signal torpedo on the track, and a red lamp will do the business. I'll do that, and the rest is easy. As soon as it stops we'll cover the engineer and fireman with our guns, shoot the guards if necessary, and get the money."

"How we goin' to open the safe, s'posin' we do manage to stop the train?" asked another tramp.

"Easy enough. Dynamite. There's plenty of it in the construction camp. It's kept in a small shanty, and I know how to use it. Oh, it's dead easy, if you'll help me. We ought to get ten thousand dollars, if we get a cent, for the engineers' and surveyors' money will be in the safe."

"We're wid youse, cully," said the fat tramp. "Eh, sports?" and he laughed.

"Sure," came the reply in a chorus.

"Not so loud!" cautioned the thumbless man. "Well then, it's all arranged. We'll wait here a while, and then start. Have you all got guns?"

"Sure," answered several.

"Well, don't be afraid to use 'em if you have to," went on the thumbless man. "Of course if they give in easy so much the better, if not—shoot!"

"You bet we will," was the reply.

In the shadow of the big tool box the boys heard the plot to wreck the pay train. Every word came to them distinctly.

"Now douse the fire," went on the thumbless man. "Some one might come along, and take a notion to look down here."

One of the tramps scattered the brands with his foot, and the scene faded away as the darkness closed in.

"Crawl away," whispered John to his brothers. "Don't make a bit of noise. Here, Waggles! Quiet now!"

On hands and knees they crawled along, the dog in their wake, but making no more noise than a shadow of the night.

On and on the boys crawled, until they judged that they were far enough away from the camp of the desperate men to make it safe to walk upright.

"Well! What do you make of that?" asked William.

"Make of it?" asked John. "It's all made up, Bill. We've got to stop it, that's what we've got to do."

"Stop it? How?"

"By giving warning."

"But we don't even know where they're going to stop the train, nor what road it's on unless it's this one," said Pete.

"Oh yes we do," answered John. "It's the Green Valley road, and they're going to do the job near the construction camp—the same place that's responsible for our trouble."

"How do you know?"

"Couldn't you tell, by hearing them talk? That man without a thumb spoke of the camp, and the hill called the Cat's Paw. That's right near our cave. Come on, we've got to go and give warning."

"But how?" insisted William.

"By telling some one at the camp—an engineer or a surveyor, or maybe our friend Mr. Carboy. Then they can telegraph back and stop the train."

"Have we got time?" asked John.

"We have, if we go through the woods, and take the short cut," decided John. "It's only about seven o'clock, and they're not going to stop the train until midnight. We can easily make it."

"Then we can't get to Freeport—and dad to-night," spoke William.

"No—no—but—but we've got to save that train," said John slowly. "Boys, here's our chance to make up for the trouble we caused Mr. Stanton with the hand car."

"And—and maybe we can help capture the thumbless man," spoke Pete.

"I hope so," replied John. "Come on now boys. We've got a hard job ahead of us, and not any too much time to do it in. Step lively. Waggles, no more deserting. We may need you."

The dog answered with a whine, and the boys, hurried along the track in the darkness, intent on only one thing—to give timely warning of the hold-up.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CAPTURE OF THE ROBBERS

"How far are we going along the railroad?" asked Pete, when they had traveled perhaps a mile.

"We'll keep on until we get to Muddy Brook," said John. "Then we can cut across lots, over the big hill, and come out at the construction camp."

"That's a hard way," observed William.

"I know it, Bill," answered his older brother, "but it's the shortest and we haven't much time."

A little later they struck off from the railroad, and went into the fields. In the darkness it was no easy traveling. They slipped and stumbled along, now falling down and now recovering themselves, Waggles following, but making no sound.

The railroad on which the boys had been traveling when the hot box caused the delay, was expected to connect with the new Green Valley line, when it was completed. And when the new line had been built past Freeport, or, as the new plans called for, through Vandalia, the two roads would meet.

To get to the railroad camp the boys would pass within two miles of the outskirts of Freeport.

On they journeyed, talking in low tones of what was before them, and wondering what measures the railroad men would use to capture the robbers.

"There's Freeport," observed John, after a period of silence.

"Where?" asked Pete.

"Over where you see those lights," and his brother pointed to the left.

"I wish we were going there," said William. "Poor dad! we ought to be with him."

"Well, we will, as soon as we give this warning," spoke John.

"But we'll hardly be able to get home until morning," went on William, "and something may happen to him in the meantime."

"Oh, I hope not," responded the oldest Smith boy. "But say, that felt like a drop of rain."

"It is rain," declared Pete a moment later, and then began an unpleasant drizzle, which soon changed into a smart shower.

"It's just like the night we ran away from home," observed William. "Burr—r—r—r—r! I stepped in a bog-hole then!"

He stumbled, and would have fallen, but John caught him.

They hurried on, through the wet fields, pushing their way amid underbrush and rank weeds, caring for nothing as long as they made progress. They waded Muddy Brook, and then began to climb the hill, which, once over, would nearly bring their journey to an end. This was the hardest part of all, but they accomplished it, and then, wet, muddy and tired, with torn clothes and bruised hands, they stood on the summit.

"There's the camp!" exclaimed William, as he

pointed to where the construction gang of the new railroad were gathered.

Several fires gleamed fitfully because of the rain, and from the rough board shacks, and some tents there shone flickering lanterns.

"What time is it?" asked Pete.

"Nearly eleven o'clock," replied John, looking at a cheap watch he carried, lighting a match to do so.

"Well, we're in time," spoke William. "Now let's hurry down, and warn some one. I guess we'd better ask for Mr. Carboy."

They scrambled down the side of the hill, part of which had been cut away to make room for the railroad. As they started toward the clump of shacks, where they knew the foreman stayed, some one called to them:

"Hey! Where you fellers goin'?"

"We want to see Mr. Carboy," replied John.

"What for?"

"We have something important to tell him."

"Humph! Who are you, anyway?" and a big man, his clothes covered with mud, in which he had been working all day, lurched forward out of the darkness.

"Tell Mr. Carboy that the Smith boys want to see him," said John. "And tell him quickly, please. We haven't much time."

Something in the boy's manner must have impressed the man. He turned aside with a grunt, and a muttered command to "wait a minute." Then he opened the door of one of the board shacks and called:

"Hey, Mr. Carboy, those Smith boys want to see you."

"Those Smith boys?"

The three brothers could hear the surprised exclamation of the foreman.

"That's what they said. Got somethin' important to tell you."

A door was thrown open quickly, and a broad patch of light shone on the ground. Framed in it was Mr. Carboy.

"Where are they?" he asked. "Those Smith boys? Why their father's been looking all over for them."

"Here we are, Mr. Carboy," answered John.

"Well, it's about time you came back," went on the foreman, not very good naturedly. "Your father's in a bad way, and——"

"Is he sick?" asked William quickly.

"No. but he's in trouble."

"We saw it in the paper," spoke John quickly. "That's why we came back."

"You'd ought to have come back before."

"We know it," admitted John, "but we were afraid to come back. But, Mr. Carboy, we've got something important to tell you. Some robbers are going to hold up the pay car. The man without a thumb is one of them!"

"Robbers! Hold up the pay train? The man without a thumb?" repeated the foreman.

"Yes!" exclaimed John. "We were held up on account of a hot box! We started to walk home, and we overheard them planning the robbery! A lot of tramps!"

Then he quickly told the foreman what he and his

brothers had overheard, adding a brief account of what had happened since they had left home several months before.

"Can't you stop the train? Can't you warn them?" finished John.

"Sure! Of course! Come on with me!" cried the foreman. "Boys, this is a great piece of news! This'll be great for you! Rob the pay train; eh? Well, we'll stop that! Come on, and I'll wake up one of the telegraph operators, and have him wire a warning. We haven't any too much time, either."

He came from his shack, grasped John by the arm, and hurried him along, the other boys following, while behind them there sounded a buzz of many voices as the men discussed the startling news.

Mr. Carboy pounded on the door of a small shanty.

"Hey!" he called. "Wake up, Snyder! Wake up!"

There was a moment's silence. Then the foreman pounded again on the door. A window was opened and a man thrust his head out.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"Matter?" cried Mr. Carboy. "They're going to hold up the pay train. Down by Cat's Paw hill. Wire 'em at Grassmore Junction to hold the train. Lively! You haven't much time."

"Wire to Grassmore Junction?" repeated the operator.

"Sure. And do it quick, Snyder."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because the wires are down. They broke late this

afternoon, and the repair gang didn't fix 'em. They didn't think I'd need 'em until to-morrow."

"Well you do, and you need 'em mighty bad! Ain't there some way you can send a message?"

"Not a way, unless I had a wireless apparatus, and that wouldn't do any good, because they haven't any at Grassmore."

"But you've got to get 'em word," insisted the foreman.

"I tell you I can't!"

"Won't the pay train pass here, through the construction camp?" asked John. "Can't you stop it here? They aren't going to rob it until it gets past the camp, where it always stays over night, on the siding."

"No we can't stop it here at the camp," replied Mr. Carboy, "because it won't go through the camp."

"Why not?"

"Because since you've been away we've had to build the line somewhat different, on account of going to Vandalia. There's a branch line, running off from Grassmore, making a curve, and joining this line just this side of the Waydell river.

"It's only temporary, though. Had to branch off on account of the bridge over Black Creek weakening. You see the line comes down as far as Grassmore, and then it splits in two. One part comes right here to this camp. The other swings around in a big half circle, and joins the main line about five miles below here, and that's about where the hold up will take place."

"Then you've got to warn the train before it gets to Grassmore?" asked William.

"That's it, for after it starts away from there it won't stop until it joins the main line again."

"And the dangerous bridge over Black Creek is between here and Grassmore?"

"That's it, and there's no way of getting word to Grassmore, now that the telegraph line is down. I don't see how we're going to warn 'em in time."

There was a moment's silence.

"How far is it from here to Grassmore Junction?" asked William.

"Five miles. Farther than a man could go before the train leaves there. It's due to leave there in half an hour, and after that there's no stopping it. It'll go to the junction below here, stay all night, as it always does, and back up here in the morning, to pay the men off. Only they won't be paid off, because those scoundrels will have all the money by then! Oh, boys, why didn't you come sooner?"

"We couldn't," explained John.

"Five miles in half an hour," said William slowly. "We ought to be able to do it, for it's a level grade."

"Run five miles in half an hour," said Mr. Carboy. "There ain't nobody here what can do it."

"Maybe not, but we can do it on that!" said William quickly.

"On what?"

William pointed to a big hand car drawn up along side of the track.

For a moment no one spoke. Then the meaning of William's words was plain to all of them. On a hand

car, worked by the powerful arms of the railroad men, the distance could be covered in the time left.

"That's it!" cried Mr. Carboy. "Boy, you're all right! You'll have another ride on a hand car, but it won't be like the first one," and he smiled grimly.

"Are we going?" asked William.

"Of course. I want you to tell your story to the men on the pay car. Then you'll be able to identify the robbers when we catch them. For we'll catch them now! We can make the trip in time on the hand car to stop the pay train and warn them."

Mr. Carboy ran to another shanty, and, by pounding on the door awakened several men. He gave them his orders quickly.

"Lively!" he cried. "Pile out now. Not a moment to lose. Get that hand car on the track, some of you. Galligan, fetch my revolvers from my shack. Tell some of the surveyors to tumble out, and bring their guns with them. There's going to be hot work, and they'll need 'em!"

Before the boys knew what was happening they were on a big hand car, in the midst of a throng of burly men.

"Make her hum!" cried Mr. Carboy. "Snatch her right along boys. Break the handles—but get there!"

Up and down went the big levers which worked the geared cogs that moved the hand car. The wheels screeched on the wet rails, they clicked as they went over switches and then, gathering speed, as the brawny arms worked the handles up and down, the vehicle, with its load of men and boys, fairly sang over the ribbons of steel.

Ten men, in addition to the boys, rode on the hand car. Nearly all the men were armed, and they knew there were several weapons in the pay car. It was raining hard, but no one minded that.

"We've got to do it! We've got to do it," murmured Mr. Carboy, over and over again. "Snatch her along boys! Make her hum!" and every now and then he would take hold himself, and help pump.

The wet rails hindered their progress somewhat, but they had a level grade in their favor. Every few minutes Mr. Carboy would look at his watch by the light of a lantern on the hand car.

"Hurry! Hurry!" he exclaimed. "Only a few minutes left!"

In the darkness they passed over a stretch of track that gave forth a deep rumble.

"The Black Creek bridge," said Mr. Carboy. "Only a mile more boys! Snatch her along!"

The hand car seemed to fly over the rails. They went around a curve at such speed that the boys were nearly flung off. And then, a moment later, they saw a light glaring into their faces, the big light of a locomotive. And they heard the puffing of the engine.

"They've started to leave!" cried Mr. Carboy. "We must stop them! And I didn't bring a red lantern!"

For a moment it seemed as if they must fail, after all, for they were still some distance away from the pay train, which was pulling off onto the junction track, and would soon be beyond stopping.

"Here! Take my red handkerchief!" cried one of the men. "Wrap it around the lantern!"

It was done in an instant, and, as the hand car with its load of human freight shot forward, Mr. Carboy was frantically waving the improvised red light.

There came a shrill whistle from the engine, a grinding sound as the air brakes were clapped on, and the pay train came to a stand still. They were only just in time.

The foreman leaped off before the hand car had come to a stop, and, an instant later was rapidly telling a very much startled engineer and fireman the reason for the signal.

From the pay car came several guards, and the pay master who had been awakened in his berth. The impending hold-up was quickly told of.

"What will we do; stay here to-night, and run down in the morning?" asked the engineer.

"Stay here nothing!" exclaimed one of the guards. "We'll run down there to-night, and we'll capture the whole gang! I guess we've got force enough," and he looked grimly around at the group of brawny railroad men.

"Pile in, then," ordered the engineer, and the hand car, having been lifted from the track, the railroad men, with the Smith boys in their midst, entered the pay car.

There was a hasty conference as to the best plan to follow, the boys told the important parts of their story again, and then the engine started off once more.

The storm increased, but the pay car made good time over the slippery rails. On through the darkness and rain; over the new line it went.

Suddenly, above the rattle of the rail joints, as the wheels passed over them and the switch points, came a sharp report.

"That's them! The torpedo!" exclaimed Mr. Carboy.

He peered cautiously out of a window. Ahead, on the track, could be seen a flickering red lantern, and, as the foreman watched, there sprang into the glare of the locomotive headlight, half a score of ragged figures.

"There they are!" cried Mr. Carboy, and then something happened.

From the pay car sprang the husky railroad men, grasping their revolvers, the guards of the pay car their rifles. In spite of orders to the contrary, the Smith boys followed.

The scene was suddenly lighted up by a score of signal torches, which burned with a red fire, making the place brilliant. The amazed gang of tramps, led by the thumbless man, hung back an instant, and then started to flee.

"Come back!" cried their leader, as he raised his weapon and fired at the advancing railroad men.

Some of the tramps did turn, and there was an exchange of shots.

"Rush 'em, boys!" cried Mr. Carboy.

To the glare of the red torches was added white slivers of flame from the revolvers, and above the drone of the rain sounded the sharp crack of the weapons.

The battle lasted only a few minutes, and, when it was over most of the tramps, including the thumbless man had been captured. One or two of the railroad

men had been slightly injured by bullets, as had two of the tramps.

"A good night's work, boys," remarked Mr. Carboy, as he helped to lead the prisoners back to the pay car. "If it hadn't been for the warning these lads gave us, the Green Valley road would be in a bad fix now."

"Did those boys warn you of our plans?" asked the man without a thumb.

"They did," replied Mr. Carboy, "and I'm thinking they have another bone to pick with you concerning some three thousand dollars."

The thumbless man started. He seemed about to say something, and then he thought better of it.

A little later, securely bound, the prisoners were placed in the pay car, and the run back to Grassmore Junction was begun, as there was a strong jail there, where it was planned to put the robbers.

CHAPTER XXXV

FREEPORT GETS THE RAILROAD

"Well," remarked John, several hours later, when Grassmore had been reached, and the tramps and their leader safely disposed of, "I guess we'd better start for home, now."

"Wait until morning," advised Mr. Carboy. "It'll soon be daylight, and we'll take you down on the pay car, and run you to the railroad camp. You can easily go home from there."

They decided this was best, and, in the care of the paymaster, who could not seem to thank the boys enough, they went to a hotel, where they spent the rest of the night.

"Just think, we'll soon be home, and see dad," spoke Pete, when they had finished breakfast, and were on their way to the new depot at Grassmore Junction.

"That's right," agreed John.

"I wonder how they'll receive us in Freeport?" came from William. "I don't s'pose they'll hold a reception in our honor, or get up a banquet."

"Not much," replied John. "If they let us alone, that's all I'll ask."

They found the men of the pay car, and some of those who had made the memorable ride on the hand car, waiting to start.

"All ready?" asked the engineer.

"All ready I guess," replied the paymaster.

Just then the telegraph operator came hurrying from the depot.

"You'll have to wait," he said to the engineer.

"Wait? What for?"

"The president's special is coming down on an inspection trip. He wants the right of way. He's heard about the hold-up and wants to see you. I just got a message."

"All right," said the engineer. "I guess the president's special car has the right of way on the road he owns most of."

It was less than an hour later when the whistle of an approaching locomotive was heard, and soon there pulled into the Grassmore station the fine private car of President Newton, of the Green Valley railroad.

"What's this I hear, Mr. Strong, about a hold-up?" asked the president as he descended from his car, and approached the paymaster.

"Well, we nearly had one, but those boys saved us from it."

"What boys?"

"Those Smith boys."

Mr. Strong waved his hand toward our three heroes.

"Those Smith boys," repeated the president slowly. "Those Smith boys? Seems to me I've heard that name—er—are those the boys——?"

He paused for a moment. Another man came from the private car, and joined him. It was Mr. Stanton, the chief surveyor, whose tent had been demolished by

the hand car, started that unlucky day by the Smith boys.

The president and the surveyor held a whispered conversation, the eyes of Mr. Stanton now and then seeking the faces of the three brothers, who hardly knew whether to stay or hurry off.

"The same boys; eh?" they heard the president say. "Well, I guess we'd better—er—um——"

And the remainder of what he said was lost in a whisper.

"I guess he's going to have us arrested," said William in a low voice to his brothers.

"Well, if he does, we can't help it," said John.

"Boys," spoke the president suddenly, approaching them, "Mr. Stanton here tells me you are the same lads who—er—well, who caused him some inconvenience a while ago. Are you?"

"I guess we are," admitted John, "but it was an accident. We didn't mean to do it."

"And last night you gave the warning which saved the pay car from being robbed of a large sum, and, very likely prevented some of my employes from being killed."

"We happened to see the tramps, and hear what they were saying," explained John, "so we told Mr. Carboy."

"Exactly, and saved the pay train. Ha! Hum! Well, I rather think what you did to Mr. Stanton's tent with the hand car has been wiped out by the service you rendered us last night; eh Stanton."

"Yes, sir," and the surveyor smiled in a friendly fashion at the boys.

"And left us considerably in your debt," went on Mr. Newton. "Eh, Stanton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Suppose you come into my car, boys. I have something to say to you," continued the president.

Wondering what was about to happen the three brothers went in. They found it magnificently furnished, and, in one compartment a number of gentlemen were at breakfast, being waited on by a colored cook.

"This beats Professor Clatter's wagon," whispered Pete.

"It sure does," agreed William.

Mr. Newton and Mr. Stanton were off in one corner of the car, conferring together, and looking over maps and plans. Soon the president came toward the boys.

"Mr. Stanton has been telling me some things," he said. "I understand that your town wants our road to come there?"

"I guess it does," replied John.

"But Mr. Stanton decided after—er—after your little accident, that he'd rather take it to Vandalia, as it didn't make much difference to us which town it touched."

John nodded, wondering what was coming next.

"But I feel that we should recognize, in some way, the service you rendered last night," went on the president, "and, as Mr. Stanton assures me that he holds no enmity toward you, and as he explains that it is not too late, why I have decided that the railroad will come to Freeport, instead of Vandalia."

"Will the road really come to Freeport?" asked William.

"It will," replied Mr. Newton, "and we'll build a nice station there. But I want the citizens of that place to understand that the change is made on your account, and to pay you for what you did. You have more than offset the trouble you caused by starting off that hand car."

The boys' eyes sparkled. This was good news indeed.

"I realize also," said Mr. Newton, "that this is not a very personal reward for you boys. But I am coming to that."

"We didn't do it for a reward," said John quickly.

"I know it, and that is why I am the more glad to give it to you. Mr. Stanton tells me that if the road comes to Freeport, which it will, we will need considerable land. He says he made some surveys, when he was contemplating this move, that is before he decided to go to Vandalia, and that we will require a large piece of land owned, I understand by your father. For this are willing to pay a good sum. Do you think he will sell?"

John and his brothers thought of the trouble in which their father was, over money matters.

"I'm sure he will," replied John.

"Then tell him we will give him fifteen thousand dollars for his piece of swamp meadow," went on the railroad president."

"Oh, I don't know how to thank you!" exclaimed John. "And my brothers——"

"One moment," continued Mr. Newton. "Here are some envelopes, but I don't want you to open them until you get home. I am going to take you down in my private car. Remember, do not open them until you get home."

The boys promised, hardly able to believe their good fortune.

"Well, we may as well proceed with the inspection," said the president, after a pause. "Have you boys had breakfast?"

John assured him that they had, so Mr. Newton joined his colleagues at the breakfast table, and the boys sat looking from the broad windows of the special car, as it rolled swiftly along.

"There's where the hold-up was," remarked John, as they passed the spot where the tramps had been captured.

Two hours later, the president's car, having reached the construction camp, where he was to remain for some time, the boys started for home across the fields, Waggles trailing after them.

"Won't dad be surprised to see us?" said John.

"Yes, and won't the people be surprised when they hear that the railroad's coming here?" spoke William.

The reached the outskirts of the town.

"There's Spider Langdon!" exclaimed Pete.

His brothers glanced quickly up to see the longlegged bully hurrying down the highway.

"He acts as though he was afraid of us," commented Pete.

Spider had good reason to be.

"The town doesn't seem to have changed much," observed William.

"Well, we haven't been away so long, though it seems like a good while to us," said John. "Wait until the railroad comes here though; then you'll see some changes."

They were now in the town. Persons were staring curiously at them. They passed Simeon Dent, president of the Board of Trade.

"What! You boys back?" he asked, in some surprise.

"Yes," replied John.

"Humph! Some folks thought you was goin' to stay for good," was the somewhat ungracious comment.

The boys continued on.

"No one seems very glad to see us," observed Pete.

"Not what you could call a hearty welcome," added William.

"There's our house!" exclaimed John. "Now to see dad."

But when they had knocked on the door, it was not the genial housekeeper, Mrs. Murdock, who opened it.

"Isn't Mr. Smith—doesn't he live here?" faltered John.

"Oh, he moved out some time ago," replied the woman. "He had to sell this house, and I bought it at auction."

"Where—where is he?" asked William, an uneasy feeling coming over him and his brothers.

"Oh, he's boarding at Mrs. Simpson's."

"At Simpson's," murmured Pete. It was a low class boarding house, where laboring men used to stop.

"Poor dad," murmured John, "he must have had hard luck. But come on, we'll tell him the good news."

They turned away. As they were going down the street they heard some one hail them.

"It's Bateye Jones!" exclaimed William, turning around.

"Where in the world did you fellows come from?" asked Bateye. "You're dad's nearly crazy looking for you."

"We just got in," replied John. "We're going to find my father now."

"Then you're going the wrong way," said Bateye.

"Why?" inquired William.

"Because he's down at my house. He's sick. Mom heard about him being sick, down at Mrs. Simpson's, and she made him come to our house. Come on, he'll be more than glad to see you."

The boys lost no time. In a little while they stood beside their father, who was pale and wan. His face lighted up at the sight of his boys.

"Oh," he murmured, "I thought I never was going to see you again. Why did you go away?"

Rapidly they told him, and, for the first time learned how useless had been their flight.

"But they aren't any too friendly to us now," said Pete. "We passed Mr. Dent, and——"

"Well, some folks think you're responsible for the railroad not coming here," said Bateye, "but that's all bosh. I guess they didn't want to come, anyhow."

"Well, they needn't hold that feeling against us any longer," said John slowly.

"Why not?" asked Bateye.

"What do you mean?" inquired Mr. Smith.

"I mean that the railroad's coming here!" cried John. "It's just been decided. We saved the pay train from being robbed, and Mr. Newton decided to run the road here."

"Hurrah!" cried Bateye, dancing about the room. "Now maybe folks'll take their hats off to you."

"Are you sure of this, boys?" asked Mr. Smith.

"Yes, and what's more," added William, "they're going to buy your meadow swamp, and give you fifteen thousand dollars for it."

"Thank the dear Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Smith feebly. "That is the best news I've heard since you went away! Now I can begin life over again."

"And we caught the man who stole your three thousand dollars," added Pete.

"You did?"

"We sure did. The man without a thumb."

Of course they had to start in then and tell their whole story, how they had fallen in with Professor Clatter, and the weather prophet, and all.

"Well, you certainly had some adventures," remarked Bateye enviously.

"And I hope they're over for a while," said Pete.

They were, for a time, but the Smith boys had many others, and if you wish to read of them you will find them set down in the second volume of this series, to be called "Those Smith Boys on the Diamond; or, Nip and Tuck for Victory."

There was great surprise and rejoicing on the part

of the citizens of Freeport when it was learned that the railroad was coming there, and corresponding gloom in Vandalia. And, when it was learned that the Smith boys were the cause of the change, as many nice things were said about them as, before, unpleasant remarks had been made.

"I always said those Smith boys had lots of gumption," remarked Simeon Dent. "The idea of them preventin' the train hold-up, and gettin' the road here. Now Freeport will begin to boom."

Which it did. Property increased in value, and business was much better. Mr. Smith received his money for the only piece of land that he had been able to retain when the crash in his affairs came, and this was mainly because it was considered so worthless that no one would buy it.

With the fifteen thousand dollars, and two thousand, which was recovered from the thumbless man, who confessed that he had robbed Mr. Smith, the latter was able to buy back his store.

The man without a thumb, who had a long police record, and his tramp associates were sent to jail for lengthy terms. The boys would liked to have gotten back the five hundred dollars stolen from Professor Clatter, but the robber had spent all of this. The reason he had some of the three thousand stolen from Mr. Smith, was because he had hidden it before starting off on a tour of crime with the tramps.

Mr. Smith soon recovered his health when he had no longer any worry over his missing sons, and his failure, and he went into business again, on a larger

scale than before, for, with the advent of the railroad in Freeport, trade boomed wonderfully.

"Say, fellows," remarked John, one day, "we never opened those envelopes that Mr. Newton gave us."

"That's so, we didn't" added William. "I wonder what's in 'em?"

"Best way is to open 'em and find out," suggested Pete.

They did so, and found in each one a crisp hundred dollar bill, and a perpetual pass over the lines of the Green Valley railroad.

"As a slight appreciation of what the Smith boys did for us," President Newton had written on cards in the envelopes.

"Well, say, that isn't so bad; is it?" asked William.

"I should say not!" exclaimed Pete. "With what we got from Professor Clatter we've got a nice little sum now."

"We'll need it if we go to Westfield Academy," spoke John. "Dad talks of sending us there this fall."

"I hope he does," said Pete. "We'll have some sport."

"Hark!" exclaimed William, as he listened to some noise outside.

There came to the ears of the boys the call of a tree toad.

"It's Doc Lutken," said Pete, and soon a voice called:

"Hey, fellows, come on out, Waggles is chasin' a cat."

And now, for a while, we'll say good-bye to those Smith boys.

The Passover

(AN INTERPRETATION)

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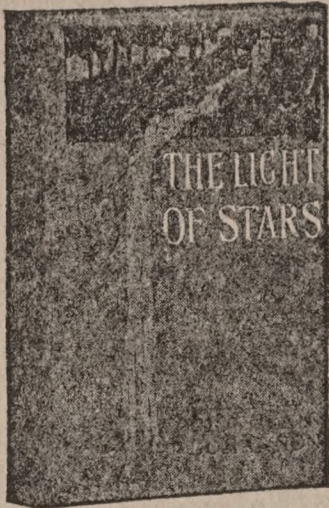
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